

CONTESTED FREEDOM

‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’

Matin Luther King Jr.

‘Freedom’ versus ‘Nationalism’

For the past almost a year, a lot of discussions and debates have been going around India on the question of ‘Freedom’ (*Azadi*). Parallel to this, another aspect – nationalism vis-à-vis anti-nationalism and one’s loyalty towards nation – has remained much in public circles. Freedom of speech, expression, religion, thought, governance, choice of ones’ likes and dislikes has been upheld by the Indian Constitution and by various international laws, covenants and conventions to which India is also a signatory as well as ratified by the Indian state. Why such a critical discussion is needed at this juncture?

How does freedom or nationalism matter for the Adivasis who live in constant fear on gunpoint in places like Bastar? What does freedom mean to them to loose their fellow beings every day? How is nationalism justified for the everyday rape victims in conflict zones? How does freedom actualise for the Dalits who still reel under their caste lords? What does nationalism mean to the ones who are humiliated, discriminated, isolated, excluded, attacked, raped and socially boycotted in the name of caste and identity? How does nationalism relate to the working masses in their everyday struggles for survival? What does freedom or such expression bring forth to the multitudes of social and cultural groups who live under social and political pressure?

In India, today, the constitutional values of justice, equality, liberty and fraternity have entered a phase of serious crisis, particularly with the unmanageable level of oppression and repression unleashed by the dominant sections and power centres. In his 125th year of birth anniversary, Ambedkar’s constitution is perhaps lying on the deathbed.

Over the past one-decade while the attack on Dalits, Adivasis and other marginalised groups have increased, the unbridled usurpation of natural resources like land, forests, water and minerals has continued multifold. Caste runs as the lifeline of the social engagement in all forms. While efforts to intensify and consolidate casteism are on a high scale with very powerful tools like murder, rape, anti-reservation campaigns and consistent curtail of public spaces at one end, the unchecked loot of resources at the behest of the corporates have continued. The government has arranged all forms of security cordon for the corporates with police and para-military

forces engaged in uncontrolled violent measures. The lethal weapon of arbitrary power has left the 'First Nations' to live in fear and terror in such areas.

Alongside the capture of resources, the intensification of attack on Muslim and Christian minorities and their institution has exposed the agenda of right wing Nationalism. Minorities across the country live in fear. This is diametrically opposite to the constitutional spirit of plurality, coexistence of multiple ethnicity, mutuality and secular polity. This unpredictable level of intolerance has led to blatant violation of human rights and it has turned too difficult to voice against such acts. Anyone who dares to voice against it has faced severe consequences such as violent attacks, ghettoisation, implication in fake cases and often accused as anti-national.

Women and working masses are the worst hit due to the emergent trends. The question of freedom is not just a matter of right but it is one of the essential prerequisite of reasoning, which therefore should be the ideal edifice of democratic plurality, where the people are the Sovereign rulers. According to Justice Krishna Iyer 'the censorial power lies with the masses over and against the government and not in the government over and against the people.' The level of suppression of freedom has definite painful consequences, which weaken the foundations of secular, socialist, democratic republic. The oppressed, marginalised and minority sections are the receivers of such institutional disparity of the state, which manifests the contest within the social order.

Ambedkar's Insights

Ambedkar had been the champion of freedom, free thinking and liberty whose words are important to be remembered. According to him,

'There are two fundamental tenets of a free social order. They are: (i) individual is an end in himself and the aim and object of society is the growth of the individual and the development of his personality. Society is not above the individual. But, the individual has to subordinate himself to society because such subordinate is for his betterment and (ii) the terms of associated life among members of society must be based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The cancerous caste system is at the root of it. The caste system and equality are incompatible to one another. The principle of gradation and rank is the essence of caste system. The caste system has recognised slavery in inverse order of status and maintained inequality in every sphere of human activity – social, political, economic, legal, religious etc.'

This insightful quote provides the depth of caste where liberty and equality are antagonistic to the very notion of caste. On another occasion while discussing the reality of being a free human Ambedkar said,

‘he who is not a slave of circumstances and is always ready and striving to change them in his favour, I call him free. One who is not a slave of usage, customs, of meaningless rituals and ceremonies, of superstitions and traditions; whose flame of reason has not been extinguished, I call him a free man. He who has not surrendered his free will and abdicated his intelligence and independent thinking, who does not blindly act on the teachings of others, who does not blindly accept anything without critically analysing and examining its veracity and usefulness, who is always prepared to protect his rights, who is not afraid of ridicule and unjust public criticism, who has a sound conscience and self-respect so as not become a tool in the hands of others, I call him a free man. He who does not lead his life under the direction of others, who sets his own goal of life according to his own reasoning and decides for himself as to how and in what way life should be lead, is a free man.’

These passages provide the insights of Ambedkar on how one could understand and define freedom for those who are historically enslaved or else are compelled to follow a different pattern of slavery at present. The current pattern of thwarting off the space of the common citizen and reconstructing a socio-economic and political order against the spirit of the constitution is in one way or other the reinforcement of systemic slavery over a majority sections. The plurality-centricity of the constitution – including that of people’s right and control over resources such as land, water, forest, production, forest produce, minerals and knowledge – is being reversed from its edifice. Caste, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and other identities have turned out to be key constituents and centres of power, where the noble values of sharing, caring and cooperation are being replaced by accumulation, profit and surplus. This further drifts the egalitarian relationship between human and nature to that of consumption and commodity.

The continuous process of legitimisation of despotic domination and dictatorial pattern of tyranny through social constructs as well as the expropriation of resources is the best method to enslave people as well as to capture and appropriate the knowledge that has evolved over several millenniums. Thus the contest is between an ‘Enlightened India’ with freedom and accommodative space for all versus the ‘Bharat of a Few’ based on violence, power, discrimination, disparity, conflict, masculinity and power show. Such fear of freedom roves today at large.

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