Ambedkar and the Constitution of India: A Deweyan Experiment

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This essay explores the democratic ethos championed by Dewey in the context of the Indian constitution. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, studied with Dewey at the Columbia University during 1913–16, and often credits Dewey for a lasting impression on his thinking. I focus on two examples of Ambedkar’s efforts to exercise democratic experimentalism. The first is the provision in the Indian Constitution dealing with remedial treatment for disadvantaged citizens, variously called ‘positive discrimination and compensatory discrimination’. The second is the attempted passage of the Hindu Code Bill in 1951 for comprehensive reform to clarify, standardize and streamline Hindu personal law. The Indian Constitution can be taken as a location where the Deweyan robust sense of democracy is reflected in its aim for an inclusive, associated public space, in no small measure due to Ambedkar’s Deweyan experiment.

Mrs. Savita Ambedkar tells a touching story of Ambedkar happily imitating John Dewey’s distinctive classroom mannerisms – thirty years after Ambedkar sat in Dewey’s classes. It is impossible to find in Ambedkar’s life story any hint of a living guru or a personality which dominated him, but here at least is a suggestion that he was fond of both Dewey the philosopher and Dewey the man.

– Zelliot (2001, 84)

1. Introduction

This paper explores the theme of democratic experimentalism in the context of the Indian constitution – an important location given that India is the most populous democracy of the world today – through Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s involvement with it. From the perspective of the present volume, this exploration offers an important opportunity since Dewey’s own writing on democracy has been argued to be somewhat thin in terms of clear delineation of its institutional implications. Further, as Simon points out in his essay in this volume, even in much of the literature on Dewey’s liberalism, “the institutional implications of his work remain elusive” (p. 5). What makes this project relevant
is also the fact that it allows us to explore the democratic ethos championed by Dewey in the context of Indian Constitution. This is because Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, studied with Dewey at Columbia University between 1913 and 1916 and often credits the latter for having a lasting impression on his thinking.

Given that Dewey’s influence on Ambedkar’s general thinking has remained understudied, my focusing only on the context of Indian Constitution might seem misguided. I believe, however, that such a focus has two advantages. Such a focus would allow us to assess Mukherjee’s claim that “American neopragmatists like Stanley Fish, were they to pay attention to this student of Dewey’s [viz., Ambedkar], would need to revise their contention that ‘if pragmatism is true it has nothing to say to us; no politics follows from it or blocked by it; no morality attaches to it or is enjoined by it’” (Mukherjee 2009, 348). If we are able to find a sustained engagement with the ethos of pragmatism and Deweyan democratic experimentalism in at least some aspects of the Indian Constitution, then that would seem to provide clear evidence for pragmatism’s institutional and political impact. Further, those who have tried to explore Deweyan influences in Ambedkar’s general thinking seem to have focused simply on those passages in Ambedkar’s writings where he is referring to and/or acknowledging Dewey or explicitly drawing from his ideas. This approach has limited these scholars, Kadam and Mukherjee, for example, look at Dewey’s Democracy and Education exclusively since most of Ambedkar’s explicit and implicit Dewey quotes come from this work. I think this might limit us and therefore keep us from exploring Ambedkar’s Deweyan influences to their fullest extent. This has also encouraged some of these Ambedkar scholars to argue how Dewey provided a ‘different lens’ – different from that of Orientalism – through which Ambedkar came to see the world (Mukherjee 2009, 345).

What I find problematic with this articulation is that it seems to overlook the formative roles Ambedkar’s experiences of growing up as a member of the Mahar community – as an untouchable – play in the fashioning of Ambedkar’s perspective.

I find Zelliot’s interpretation more reasonable when she argues that Ambedkar was quite mature by 1913 at the age of 23 when he went to Columbia and came in contact with Dewey among his other professors. So instead of saying Dewey’s thinking provided him a different way to look at the world, it might be more accurate to say that in Dewey’s thinking on democracy Ambedkar’s already formed socio-political dispositions and sensibilities found a home. To quote Zelliot, “It is more likely that in those early years in America [Ambedkar’s] own natural proclivities and interests found a healthy soil for growth, and the experience served chiefly to strengthen him in his lifelong battle for dignity and equality for his people” (Zelliot 2001, 85). Thus Ambedkar’s American experience as well as his Deweyan influences reinforced his already formed convictions and intellectual dispositions. Indeed, it is Ambedkar’s commitment to achieve dignity and equality for his people, the untouchables,