

# THE AMBEDKAR TOUCH IN RETHINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE POLICIES

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'Dalits and Adivasis should be advanced as the essential components of urbanisation, industrial production and technological innovations' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Modern democracy is synonymous with both the values of social harmony and reforms that ensure dignity and self-respect to its participants, especially the historically deprived and socially marginalised people. Further, democratic institutions are mandated to engage with the worst-off social groups and ensure their substantive participation as a significant governing class in political affairs. The socially oppressed groups in India, especially Dalits, adored and celebrated such modern virtues because of their liberative potential and egalitarian goals. Babasaheb Ambedkar emerged as a torchbearer of liberal enlightened ideas and expected that post-colonial India would be distinct from the exploitative Brahmanical past and invite Dalits and other marginalised communities to be equal shareholders in the nation's economic and political development. Ironically, the modernist objectives have been partially achieved only today. With the ascent of neo-liberal economic development, the conventional support that Dalits and Adivasis have received from state institutions, has derailed.

In current times, it is a norm to witness the domination of the social elites as powerful authorities, national leaders, business tycoons, and cultural influencers. The control and the hegemony of the conventional ruling class have been perpetuated without much disturbances, whereas the socially marginalised groups have only managed to have a tokenistic presence in the domain of power and privileges. Though various political regimes vouch to implement social justice policies, this has little impact in ensuring the significant participation of the worst-off social groups in the domain of power. B.R. Ambedkar's principles of social justice would reprimand the current realm of neo-liberal economy for its neglect of the concerns of Dalits and Adivasis and would direct the market to be more responsible towards the worst-off social groups. It would also direct the state to reduce the pitfalls and slippages now in social justice policies and make them more relevant in the present day.

Ambedkar becomes crucial in such a discourse because his approach allows us to diagnose illnesses in the social and economic order. He offers ethical corrective measures to make institutions more democratic, representative and closer to the claims and the desires of marginalised social groups. Though the mechanism of social justice is not radical and transformative (unlike the Marxist model), it provides moral sensibilities to institutions and makes

it responsible towards the diverse population.

It is well-documented that the neo-liberal market is alien to such ethical values and overtly celebrates the exclusive control of few corporate bodies and businessmen over capitalist development. Such a distancing of the market from social responsibilities, especially its neglect towards the aspirations and the demands of Dalits and Adivasis has made the market enterprise more exploitative and closer to a crony capitalist mode. This version of the market economy needs reforms.

It is an appropriate time to imagine how the worst-off social groups can become an integral and substantive part of the new economic order, reducing their perpetual subjugation as a passive exploited class. It is required that the new social justice policies be expanded to the private economy, with a focus to democratise the working classes and to reduce poverty. A substantive integration of social justice policies in directing the prospects of the market economy would integrate Dalits and Adivasis as a part of the working classes and also elevate their stature as influential upholders of capitalist assets.

Adivasi concerns to protect their habitats, ecological order and cultural autonomy must be addressed, while endorsing the fact about the market economy's inevitability. Therefore, it is necessary that the current phase of economic development, technological innovations and the expansion of the market economy should also be directed toward making Dalit and Adivasi groups as influential arbitrators in the neo-liberal discourse. Newer conditions and reparation policies should be adopted to fight the historical wrongs and social discrimination against these groups, ensuring their equitable participation in the diverse spheres of economic development.

The new framework of social justice must ensure that an impressive class among Dalits and Adivasis emerges as the leaders, business entrepreneurs and influencers in the economic sphere. Such a prospect would allow policymakers to look beyond the conventional social justice policies that often address Dalit-Adivasi groups as the passive recipient of the state's welfare packages.

Further, Dalits and Adivasis should not be identified only as the poor and migrant working class that is dependent upon the benevolence of corporate social responsibility for their livelihood. Instead, these groups should be advanced as the essential components of urbanisation, industrial production and technological innovations. More affirmative action policies are required to democratise the niche sphere of big businesses so that the Dalit-Adivasi class should also emerge as industrialists, market leaders and crucial influencers in the global economy.

Ambedkar looked upon the modern state as the key transformative force for the emancipation of Dalits and Adivasis. However, in the neo-liberal realm, the state has been converted as the passive associate of big business that readily deviates from its social responsibilities and welfarist values. The new agenda of social justice should be oriented towards the leaders of the market economy, educating to adopt welfarist measures for the worst-off social groups, and making them integral to economic development. Ambedkar's version of social justice would help us to redefine capitalism as a pluralist and cooperative mode of economic order that guarantees the substantive participation of Dalits and Adivasis in the market economy and in the associated institutions of power and privileges.

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