

## Keeping the republic

Benjamin Franklin is said to have made this observation on the American constitution: "A republic if you can keep it". It was as much a comment on ability as it was on intent. Republics are easy to form; they are difficult to sustain. Republics can be sustained in a formal manner more easily than they can be sustained in their content. A majority of the countries claim to be republics but republicanism eludes many of them.

Like every year, the Republic Day this year too would be full of a display of India's cultural heritage and military might. Cities and states will compete with each other to raise the mast higher to hoist the flag. But the Franklin poser could still not be easily avoided. Our founding fathers gave us a republican constitution but all they could hope was that a civic virtue, necessary for republicanism to strike roots, would be cultivated by the recipients of the benefits of the republic.

Dr Ambedkar warned that "however good a constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad because those who are called to work it, are a bad lot". He did not refer merely to elected representatives or the "rulers", but to the incomplete project of transforming people into citizens. Therefore, Republic Day, just as it brings celebrations and pronouncements of pride in the might of the state, exhorts us to introspect on the fragile republican culture that would undercut the formal edifice of the republic. At least four core challenges to the idea of republic can be identified.

The first concerns the distortions of democracy. Among the more glaring, we can list majoritarianism, rise of vigilantism and institutional corrosion. As democracy gets converted into shows of numerical strength, the capacity to negotiate and deliberate drowns under the noise of numbers. This trait gives way to an anarchic articulation of vigilantism by protectors of various causes, rejecting the idea of rule of law. Both a cause and an effect of this is the all-round corrosion of institutions. It would be tough to identify institutions that continue to enjoy and consolidate confidence in their institutional practices and in their capacity to deliver. There is an inter-institution competition to display their flair for failure. From media to military and from administration to adjudication, we seem to be witnessing non-performance, transgressions, disconnects or betrayals. The republic is besieged with misplaced cultural priorities, bragging generals and brawling judges. The republic crumbles when statesmanship stops at showmanship, politics breeds fear and institutions fail to strengthen norms and procedures.

The second challenge pertains to citizenship itself. As Ambedkar presciently warned, caste and community intervene in the shaping of citizenship. Seven decades down the line, the fortresses of community have become more impenetrable. In today's India, nobody can criticise, comment or censure the practices of "another" community of which she is not part. On the other hand, insiders can only uphold and celebrate the practices and symbols of the community. Communities are beyond debate and criticism; they exist as sacred and protected enclaves where outsiders are barred from entry (save for glorification) and members are imprisoned inside.

Relations among communities are also marked by mutual suspicion. This is not confined only to Hindu-Muslim relations; even among castes, relations are, more often than not, competitive. The violence a few years ago between the Gurjjars and Meenas or the violence during the Jat agitation in Haryana are cases in point. Religious minorities are vulnerable to riots and pogroms, Adivasis face repression from expanding capitalism and Dalits continue to be subjects of humiliation and violence from upper and middle castes. As a result, individuals are unable to transcend their group identity or link their group identity to their identity as citizens. Caste-community based separation, suspicion and violence ensure that the idea of citizenship becomes a chimera. Rather than pursuing the agenda of social justice, caste action often culminates in consolidating identities, constructing symbols and creating boundaries made from cultural universes.

In this situation, it is near impossible that any idea of common or public good would emerge and sustain. So, the third challenge emerges from the absence of a shared vision of what constitutes public good. Communities are so clearly separated that each entertains a separate notion of what constitutes the “public” and therefore, what public good is. Given the fragmentation of the public and impossibility of common good, all politics and policymaking takes the form of a cynical exercise of balancing competing expectations. But the more serious casualty in this process is the loss of the idea of commonwealth which is at the core of a republic.

Finally, our republic suffers from the inability to evolve public reason. Legislatures fail to debate; television debates have become notorious for their decibel capacity rather than deliberative power; nothing debatable can be presented in textbooks; academic seminars are monitored for who the participants will be; attacking meetings of rival viewpoints is a common political act; banning works of art, literature, and academic value is the national passion across the political spectrum. Demands by almost every social section often lack in legitimacy. If communities could be imagined as persons, we might equate ourselves to the Hobbesian situation of being utterly limited in our view of self-interest. So, the problem is not merely the inability to evolve procedures and terms of debate, it is about foreclosing the possibility of debate because we are unwilling to accept that the nation is the common property of all citizens.

Obviously, republics are not made in heaven nor do they always grow out of readymade social homogeneity. The creation of India’s republic was indeed an audacious attempt because of the many social schisms. But the audacity shown by the founding fathers in creating the republic needed to be matched by the sustained collective audacity to “keep the republic”.

There has been a grievous mismatch between the ambitions of the founding fathers and the will of members of the new republic. The social structure was an impediment in the republican project, as Ambedkar pointed out, but the skills of the political process and the willingness of the collective must have been wanting too. So, on each Republic Day, the nagging question would be this: The constituent assembly gave us the republic, but do we really want to keep it?

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