

## POLYPHONIC VOICES AND LIFEWORLD – A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR'S CONCEPT OF 'ASSOCIATED LIVING'

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### Abstract

*This article sets out to introduce some significant philosophical implications of Bhimrao Ambedkar's concept of 'associated living', which can be understood as an ethical guiding ideal of democratic constitution. This philosophical analysis seeks to demonstrate that the concept of 'associated living' is deeply democratic and secular. For this reason, three aspects – the concept of the lifeworld, education and democracy, the dominant subject – are to be philosophically analyzed and illuminated. As will be shown, this concept carries out a paradigm shift within the theoretical and social realm. The 'paradigm of understanding/communication' ('Verstaendigungsparadigma') which refers to Habermas' concept of communicated action aims to challenge social hierarchies and hegemonic power and thus also challenge caste politics and religious fundamentalism.*

**Key words:** *Ambedkar, associated living, communicated action, decentralization, secularization, education*



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### I) Introduction

On January 26, 1950, India entered a new political era in order to finally cast off the colonial shackles by means of a constitutional-democratic constitution. Ambedkar saw the future as a 'life of contradictions', should it fail, 'to make our political democracy a social democracy as well'. (Ambedkar, BAWS 13, 1216) When Bhimrao Ambedkar thought about the transformation of Indian society, he was faced with the question of a viable model that would consider the factual religious and ethnic plurality and the integration of disadvantaged groups. For him there was no question that the path to modernity must be democratic. However, this undertaking is burdened with a whole set of problems: 1) How do democratization and secularization processes take place in view of traditional ways of life? 2) On what basis can secular and normative values or principles of justice be negotiated within a community, which until now had drawn its collective moral and value concepts from a metaphysical-religious frame of reference? 3) In his essay *Castes in India*, Ambedkar lamented the isolation of the castes and consequently the lack of social interaction and communication between the castes ('enclosed class'). (BAWS 1, 15) But a living democracy is based on mutual communication and a conjoint understanding of meaning in a commonly shared world. The question is therefore: Can an enacted parliamentary form of democracy solve the socio-religious and ethnic tensions, or is a guiding principle – a concept of social democracy – required that underlies parliamentarism? By *parliamentarism* I mean primarily a formal system of procedural rules, electoral procedures and constitutional laws through which a parliament is constituted and empowered to legitimately exercise power. I understand *social democracy*, however, as an informal way of communicating and negotiating interests which should lead to an attitude of fellow appreciation. Before I come to the philosophical implications, I would like to quote Ambedkar first, from which theses for the further course of this article can be derived.

## II) Theses on the concept of 'associated living'<sup>i</sup>

Ambedkar opined in *Annihilation of Caste* and in *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah* that

in an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words, there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. (BAWS 1, 15) A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society. The formal framework of democracy is of no value and would indeed be a misfit if there was no social democracy. (BAWS 1, 222)

Several theses should be emphasized in this quote. 1) Social democracy cannot be reduced to parliamentarism but is its condition. 2) Social democracy means a shared life in a shared lifeworld. Democracy is based on an understanding/communication about common interests and values on the one hand and negotiating diverging interests and values on the other hand. 3) Democratic understanding/communication requires social permeability (endosmosis) of the groups and actors who can meet on the lowest common denominator. Social democracy aims at a social model that initially prefers a sense of community – a principle of community – to the liberalistic habitus of individual basic rights and individual liberty.

## III) Conjoint communicated experience means sharing the life world

An important concern of Ambedkar throughout his life was to reconcile the groups/castes living in social isolation: 'It is the isolation of the groups that is the chief evil'. (BAWS 1, 249) As early as 1919 he revealed what he expects from social permeability, namely 'to cultivate an attitude similar to others or to be like-minded with others'. (BAWS 1, 249) Even moreover, 'to be like-minded with others is to be in communication with them or to participate in their activity'. (BAWS 1, 249) What Ambedkar has in mind is probably the reference to a shared world in which people act together. However, it should be mentioned here that the *concept of the lifeworld* ('Lebenswelt') is not explicitly mentioned by Ambedkar but is implicit in the concept of shared and communicated experience. Nevertheless, I would like to introduce the concept of the lifeworld for the following

reasons, and also because the *concept of communicated experience* is quite open to interpretation:

1) The concept of the lifeworld – as used by Schutz/Luckmann<sup>ii</sup> – describes the basic structure of a ‘reality that [...] people take for granted. This reality is the everyday lifeworld’. (29) In the everyday lifeworld, one finds the ‘realm of reality undoubtedly in which man can intervene and which one can change’. (29) Only ‘in the everyday lifeworld a common communicative environment can be constituted’. (29)

2) In the Southborough Committee Ambedkar had drawn a notional demarcation between ‘government for the people’ and ‘government by the people’. (BAWS 1, 251) His doubts about a government for the people is not surprising, because it runs the risk of neglecting the everyday basis of democratic action by alienating oneself from the population or in his words, ‘educating some into masters and others into subjects’. (251) A government by the people, on the other hand, comprehends itself as a political and social community that negotiates and relates its political interests and values on the basis of a shared lifeworld. Here Ambedkar indirectly refers to the constitution of inter subjectivity: ‘Each kind of association [...], exercises a formative influence on the active dispositions of its members’. (251) The consequence is, ‘what one is as a person is what one is as associated with others’. (251) Inherent in this idea is a (perfectionist) anthropology that – although no explicit goal of human development is given – strives for the growth of human personality (‘the growth of personality is the highest aim of society’) (251) and the development of civic virtues such as solidarity, mutual recognition and respect.

3) With the reference to the realm of life, the *conjoint communicated experience* comes into play in the sense of mutual communication and action. In everyday communication and lifeworld, traditional cultural patterns are reproduced on the one hand and put up for discussion on the other, as Jurgen Habermas explains: ‘By the interaction participants come to an understanding about their situation, they stand in a cultural tradition that they use and renew at the same time [...]’, thereby ‘relying on affiliations to social groups and at the same time affirming their integration’. (Habermas 1988, 208) In the context of social upheaval, Ambedkar's concept of democracy is not just to be seen as a form of political organization and procedural regulation for parliamentary actions, but as a free form of social association. When Ambedkar speaks of ‘interests consciously communicated and shared’ or of a ‘reciprocity of interest’ (BAWS 3, 306), what is meant is a communicative relationship in which liberty and autonomy of individuals are mutually preserved and renewed. What is decisive for Ambedkar is renewal that is the possibility of allowing discriminatory traditions or hegemonic voices to become brittle through inter subjective dialogue. This of course is linked to questions of new concepts of meaning and values:

In a changing society, there must be a constant revolution of old values and the Hindus must realize that if there must be standards to measure the acts of men there must also be a readiness to revise those standards.' (BAWS 1, 79-80)

4) In his critique about Hinduism Ambedkar had already stated that religion and morality should not serve a metaphysical ideal, but an elementary purpose ('religion consecrates these life processes while morality furnishes rules for their preservation'). (BAWS 3, 12) In order to make this secular turn, he had to naturalize the beginning and the end of moral action and attach it to an entity in which all people meet, regardless of their religious orientation or caste origin: the life world. This is a process of secularization because 'religion progressively ceases to provide legitimations for more and more of [...] this-worldly aspects of social life in both the public sphere [...] and the private sphere' (Nanda, 48). It is therefore important to find the unavoidable and lowest denominator of human coexistence: a primary interest in the reproduction of life as something *self-evident* (das 'Selbstverstaendliche').

5) The self-evident in everyday life appears from different angles. Before anything else it is the experience of a simple fact and a 'natural attitude' (Schutz/Luckmann, 30) to this world. The natural setting suggests a fundamental identity of the found world by all actors; so the lifeworld is not a subjective 'private world, but intersubjective'. (30) This attitude also makes it clear that in this intersubjectively shared world, there are not only objects but also fellow human beings who basically have similar interests and who have a reciprocal effect on me and others. Finally the lifeworld is 'never a mere collection of patches of color' (30), of incoherent phenomena that remain external to man, but is permeated by found contexts of meaning and validity, to which the practical and spiritual performance of man is connected. Lifeworld therefore not only designates an empirical object, but also a 'symbol of human subjectivity'. (Gmainer-Pranzl, 249) The world is not only passively found, but also actively created.

#### IV) Education and cooperative problem-solving

Ambedkar was painfully aware that democracy and the concept of associated living cannot be created or enacted overnight. The caste system is still too firmly anchored. Democracy and civic virtues have to be learned. There is no question that democracy and education are closely linked. Although Ambedkar has hardly spoken about the learning environment in primary school education, a structure of democratic school form in the sense of associated living could be constructed analogously on the basis of the aspects worked out so far. The basis for this is provided by the statement that 'each kind of association, as it is an educational environment, exercises a formative influence on the

active dispositions of its members'. (BAWS 1, 251) For Ambedkar learning means not only imparting knowledge to the students ('filling the mind of the student with fact or theories') (BAWS 2, 296), but subsequently conveying methods for critically dealing with literature, problems and authorities. Finally, a reflexive awareness of constructive problem-solving must be acquired, as well as 'individuality'<sup>iii</sup> promoted. (296) Individuality here is of great importance, since every individual owns unique experiences and capabilities which can be applied to the community. The condition to do so is to save the individual's freedom to express and perform these experiences and capabilities, but also interests, which we can assume, are articulated in a rational manner. To solve a problem together means one has to contribute with his skills and so have the others. But once again if the community wants one to perform at his very best, it has to secure liberties to the individual in order to gain skills which he will apply to everyone's advantage. Therefore, it is plausible that Ambedkar puts the focus initially on the concept of growth, ('the growth of personality'), which can apply both to the cooperative community and to a school environment. So, the cooperative community represents a way of life that not only intends to share a common lifeworld or a political community, but also could solve problems cooperatively. The cooperative behaviors, which were produced intersubjectively in the lifeworld could thus be of use, so to speak, for a variety of problems to be solved cooperatively. The individual with his unique abilities and his personality represents an inescapable value for the community since he gains his experience in dealing with the lifeworld in order to then bring this back into community. The cooperation then increases the probability of intelligent solutions through pluralization and mixing. So if a school community is structured similarly to a cooperative community, certain attitudes, a sense of community and democratic virtues can be practiced: 'Education, the purpose of which is to moralize and socialize the people.' (BAWS 2, 39) Cooperative problem-solving could therefore not only generate the value of cooperation as a problem-solving cooperation, but also generate a sense of unity in which the individual is highly valued.

However there is no such thing as a 'substantial content' (Jorke, 193-194) of the term cooperation or the concept of community, it is by no means a community of interests with clearly defined ideological orientations, but it is the cooperation itself that represents an ethically good to be achieved. This is important and truly democratic because a defined goal that is associated with a rigid ideology would run the risk of not only directing the participants towards this goal, but also of excluding alternative results at the outset. Admittedly, this does not mean that there will be no clear goals when it comes to problem solutions, that would be absurd in terms of coping with life. The cooperative community just aims at achieving clever and reasonable considerations of the use of means regarding the desired goal with the help of the method proposed by Ambedkar. Rationality then reveals itself in various approaches and differentiated considerations, in the progress of

reasoning or in the mastery of the means towards the goal. Ambedkar demonstrates this in terms of the interplay between ends and means:

The difficulty is that we do not sufficiently control the operations of the means once employed for the achieving of some end. For a means when once employed liberates many ends. (BAWS 1, 485)

Rationality in that sense is no longer *centered*, there is no single dominant rationality anymore because common problem-solving is made up of *many rationalities*. The manner of speaking and thinking is then no longer *monophonic*, but *polyphonic*: not in the sense of given directions of reasoning (problem-solving), but in the sense of equal participation in a given discourse. This also counters an objection that polyphonic voices dilute discourses and scientific objectivity. Quite the opposite, they create objectivity in the sense that they expand existing views and categories of reasoning, means, they approach and expand objectivity. Plurality and experience of difference would therefore be basic conditions for the cooperative problem-solving community. In this sense, a possible curriculum according to Dewey could also be considered, which definitely has subversive and pacifying potential:

We need a curriculum in history, literature and geography which will make the different racial elements in this country aware of what each has contributed and will create a mental attitude towards other people. (Dewey, in: Jorke, 194)

This would exactly correspond with Ambedkar's concerns, not only with a rehabilitation of Dalit history<sup>iv</sup>, but also with the integration of many ethnic groups and castes, each of which participate in the discourse in their own way with their abilities and epistemologies. Education – understood in this way – is democracy in the best sense, especially when respective achievements of different groups are experienced as a good. School could unite different groups, where the ‘cooperative patterns of behavior are practiced [...] which are necessary for democratic coexistence in almost all spheres of society’. (195)

#### V) Undermining the dominant subject

If one assumes communication-oriented aspects of action in the sense of Habermas in Ambedkar's concept, the ‘objectifying attitude’ (Habermas 2019, 346) of the subject loses the privileged position in relation to other subjects. This means that the subject can no longer articulate itself in a strong and privileged position within communication and negotiation processes. The subject no longer confronts the world in a dominating, reality producing, objectifying power. But within the ‘Verstaendigungsparadigma’ the subject

which is a product of intersubjective communication 'takes over and transforms the perspectives of other subjects' (346-347), that is the transition from monologue to dialogue. The intersubjective relationship allows oneself to be 'regarded as a participant in an interaction' (347) in the mirror and in the perspective of others. This means that I can look at myself from the perspective of the other person and understand the concerns and actions that have been brought forward, and so to comprehend the subjectivity of the other person. In this sense, the dominant subjectivity splits up in a variety of perspectives of interaction- and discourse-participants. However, the comprehensibility of subjectivity is also favored in that I meet with the others in the lifeworld, which for both of us also represents shared rationality and cultural interpretation patterns as a basis.

## VI) Conclusion

On the previous pages, an attempt was made to work out philosophical aspects from the concept of associated living. This concept of social democracy aims at the pacification and solidarity of a fragmentary society, which negotiates and opens new horizons of values, meaning and justice on the basis of a conjoint communicated experience. This reveals a social paradigm shift, which tries to undermine hegemonic structures through communication and understanding and takes place in the transition from monologue to dialogue. From a social point of view, undermining of the dominant subject is necessary where subjugated people are victims of powerful subjectivity and who have no voice. The broadening of perspectives, the realization that participants in interaction meet in the performative process within a commonly shared lifeworld, has a potential to contest racism and caste-based isolation. The reverence to lifeworld is therefore embedded in a process of secularization, which means – so Nanda – 'the growth of a sensibility, a Weltanschauung'. (48) This sensibility aids in gaining new perspectives in the social realm and sensitizes for alternative ways in looking at things apart from religious or metaphysical injunctions. Associated living is truly secular because it accepts religion but treats people irrespective of their confessions as equals through conjoint communicated experience. Religious or caste-based conflicts were defused because religion itself 'loses its taken-for-grantedness and becomes a choice'. (49)

All in all we must understand Ambedkar's concept as an ethical guiding principle for a truly democratic society. Critics might call it utopian, a state which never can be achieved. But due to Ambedkar's legacy it should be the other way around, a state which must be achieved by all means.



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