

The Roadless Republic

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The very initial historical momentum to forge a republic was roadless in the sense that it was directionless. Dr Ambedkar had the farsight to realise this. He declared at the time of proclaiming the constitution that the implementation of the new Constitution would involve a serious conflict between political democracy and social undemocracy. So the post-independence political history brings us face to face with the structural contradiction involved in accommodating feudal forces to keep our liberal democracy alive. The Republic has remained largely imaginary and illusory. The Republic is at an historical impasse, in search of a road after more than fifty years of roadlessness.

I AM sure that the theme of this Conference, The Republic at the Crossroads, is well-intentioned but I do think it is misguided. In this brief presentation I shall try to suggest why I think so.

First let us take a quick look at the simplified but not for that reason misleading picture of the history of our great Republic, a Republic vaguely dreamed and hoped for but never really there on the ground. This brief historical journey will confront us with a pattern of the Republic's own journey, a floundering in a roadless darkness! If this is so, then what is the sense of talking about its being at the crossroads? We have first to locate the origin of the idea of a republic based on the conception of a nation-state apparently functioning as a liberal democratic parliamentary polity, in our colonial history. The political ideology of the republic also implied, though never explicitly and boldly stated, a reasonably democratic society and a rational, modern culture expressing a humanistic human vision. This republic was dreamed by a small colonial elite, urban in their habitat and exposed to an imperially mediated and imperfect modernity. It was a microscopic minority which hated British political control but cherished the British ideals of liberal parliamentary democracy. To put it in Gandhi's vivid language, they hated the tiger's skin but loved its nature! As our history of freedom struggle shows, the attitude

of this elite towards this political ideal was riddled with confusions and contradictions. The central ambiguity and contradiction was to combine a life context which was predominantly traditional and non-modern with a political ambition which was modern. For instance, in the early annual sessions of the Indian National Congress, the institution they fashioned to carry on their political aspirations, the members stuck to their caste identities and their caste habits in food and dress. This situation reached a crisis point in the Poona Congress when Tilak challenged the elite's position that political modernization is inextricable from socio-cultural modernization, that political reform was inseparable from social reform. The ideological and institutional weakness of this elite made them impotent not only against the British but also impotent against their internal enemies. Otherwise how to explain their meek surrender to that most bitter enemy of their cherished political ideals, a man called Gandhi who virtually from nowhere attained the status of their saviour? But even here there was fundamental ambiguity. Their adherence to Gandhi's ideas and ideals was never very strong or clear, and Gandhi was shrewd enough to notice in the preface to his ideological manifesto, *Hind Swaraj*, that he was aware that the Congress was not committed to his own ideals. It was a fantastic historical situation in

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which a major political battle was led by a leader whose followers were not committed unequivocally to his ideals. No wonder that at the end of the battle what we got was not a Gandhian India but a non-Gandhian India which was nevertheless riddled with Gandhian complications.

Our very initial historical momentum to forge a republic was roadless in the sense that it was directionless. Gandhi was not able to influence it to take his road but was able only to confuse it enough not to go the other road of modernity. Our nationalist movement was at its very heart torn by a contradiction between on the one hand, a Gandhian negation of liberal parliamentary democracy, and, on the other, a hankering after a republic based on the ideologies of modern nation-state and modern parliamentary democracy. The elite were unable and unwilling to follow Gandhi in his anti-modernist politics but were also conditioned historically not to totally free themselves from Gandhian fads and oddities. In 1946 Gandhi was told bluntly by his political heir, Nehru, the Hind Swaraj was simply not an acceptable ideological proposition. Thus on the eve of independence, we found ourselves stranded in a quagmire of roadlessness. Dr. Ambedkar drew our attention to one serious aspect of this situation at the time of proclaiming the new Constitution in 1950, when he declared that the implementation of the new Constitution would involve a serious conflict between political democracy and social undemocracy in the life of the new independent nation.

While he dominated the freedom struggle with his leadership skills and charisma, Gandhi suddenly found himself politically deflated and reduced to the status of a figure-head to be ritually worshipped and virtually banished out of the political arena in free India. Though deliberately ousted from the political agenda of free India, Gandhi's heritage of a negative psyche against modern liberal democracy of the type Western bourgeoisie had historically created, could not be taken to its logical conclusion. Apart from the roadlessness arising from our uncertain and ambiguous relationship to Gandhi, other roads, too, were not easy to identify. As for the democratic socialist road, it flourished in public rhetoric but

perished in practice. The Communist road was at best a minority phenomenon. The socialists marginalized themselves, wallowing in an uncontrolled personal animosity against Nehru while the communists have managed to land themselves in a paralyzing political dilemma – to come to power at the cost of abandoning their ideology. In extreme cases, they have taken to fringe politics of armed struggle against the State.

Thus the post-independence political history of India is a history of roadlessness – accommodating feudal forces to keep alive liberal democracy, thus running into structural contradiction. Nehru's cosmetic socialim tended to bolster up a weak and dysfunctional capitalism, which eventually led to an economic crisis in the 1990s, pushing us towards a neo-liberal programme of globalization, liberalization and marketisation. This new road, in its turn, has taken us towards new crises of globally directed capitalism – increased productivity and GNP but equally towards the problems of inequality, unemployment, poverty and exploitation. On the socio-cultural side, the incomplete and distorted bourgeois revolution and negative modernization, have created a huge vacuum which communal and reactionary forces have invaded successfully, more than hinting at the potential for religious fascism. Electoral democracy, as in Germany, may be employed as a means of promoting fascism. The same logic of electoral democracy, has paralysed the left, driving it to take decisions that tend to strengthen fascist communal forces. The republic has been made further roadless by demonstrating its incapacity to tackle the issues of identity struggles of the people and the terrorist threats.

We must honestly ask the question: where is the Republic in all this messy history and reality? The Republic has remained largely imaginary and illusory, and has never succeeded in finding a road to carry on a meaningful historical journey. If I conclude in this manner, am I then a pessimist? But, in fact, I am a realist and an optimist. Therefore, I assure you that my final position is an optimistic and positive one. I suggest that we must first start thinking afresh on every issue raised by me. We need to engage ourselves in what I call a serious

and creative process of history-making. At the political level, we need to re-channel our imagination and energy away from parliamentary politics which is now in the hands of those who seek power either for its own sake or for the promotion of personal and private interests, and re-invest them in a new politics whose sole aim is to promote the material and cultural interests of the masses. The claim of the ruling elite that the panchayat raj framework can do this is not sustainable. In fact, the panchayats simply transfer power from bureaucracy (not completely, by the way) to the rural elite.

We need new institutional frames in which people are able to generate their own agendas and programmes, with the help of counter-elite, that is, those who are profoundly frustrated with the neo-liberal onslaughts on the bodies and minds of the ordinary people. This means that they are frustrated with own dysfunctional liberal democracy. It is not

that functional liberal democracy is entirely beneficial to the common people, but it does provide some space for genuine people's democracy. In our dysfunctional liberal democracy, even that small space is not available for the functioning of genuine democracy. I am fully aware that the task I am proposing for the revolutionary counter-elite is not an easy one, and that it involves the risk of the unknown and the unpredictable, making us vulnerable to mistakes and wrong turns. But what is the alternative? The alternative is, of course, the good old roadlessness. In short, the Republic is not at any crossroads. It is, in fact, at an historical impasse, in search of a road, after more than fifty years of roadlessness. We need daring and faith in our common folk. Our common folk, the common people, have so far been passive victims of history. Let us make history with them, not against them or outside them.

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