

Social Suffering and Human Responsibility:
Three Questions for Two Liberal Democracies

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The thread that keeps Ambedkar tied to India, even as he wants to smash India into smithereens and reconstruct it from the ground up, is his abiding commitment to solving the mystery of *duhkha*, the suffering of the people— not just his people, the Untouchables, but all people, the people of India.”

Ananya Vajpeyi (2012:211)

The two largest liberal democracies in today's world—the United States and India—are facing perhaps unprecedented social suffering as residents of these two countries face multiple crises. Apart from the COVID-19 pandemic (which is disproportionately affecting communities of color) and the overarching climate crisis, the residents of the advanced democracy of the United States are facing an economic recession and massive unemployment. There is widespread social unrest in the United States in response to centuries of stifling racism and the police killings of George Floyd and other Black individuals. India, an emerging democracy, has had long-standing social problems of casteism, colorism and misogyny due to its caste-based social order. Residents of India are enduring the ordeals of the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic recession. The now-jobless migrant workers (who make up the majority of India's workforce) are facing myriad problems. There is a deepening border stand-off between India and its powerful northern neighbor, China.

As residents of these two countries attempt individually and collectively to make sense of the numerous crises that have beset their societies, it is important to remember that a crisis is also

an opportunity in disguise (after all, the Chinese symbols for 'crisis' and 'opportunity' are identical). It is clear to many of us that deep-rooted social inequalities have exacerbated the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the marginalized groups and individuals. But instead of thinking that we are fated to suffer the consequences of intense social inequality and pandemics, we can choose to view this moment as an opportune time to think about reconstructing our societies so that more equitable social arrangements come into being and we can deal more effectively with COVID-19 and future pandemics.

In this essay, I take Ananya Vajpeyi (2012)'s path-breaking and inspiring text, *Righteous Republic*, as the point of departure to examine possible ways of how we can get past the social suffering brought about by multiple crises in the United States and India. One way of understanding the current conjuncture is to view it as a situation of social trauma created by persistent social inequalities, based on class, race, caste, and other social fault lines. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been especially brutal on the marginalized groups, including non-white races, so-called "lower" caste groups, and women. If we are to get past this point of social suffering, we have to be creative and envision a more equitable world where the difference between being affluent (and/or belonging to the more privileged races, castes and gender) and being poor or underprivileged does not amount to the difference between life and death.

Another way to view the present is to see it as a situation of epistemological crisis (to use the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's term) which may infect either an individual or a tradition. MacIntyre uses the term epistemological crisis "to describe a state affecting the consciousness of either an individual or culture, wherein existing epistemologies, or ways of knowing, no longer seem adequate to accurately comprehend or describe the world. From long habit, people understand things a certain way, until one day they encounter some unexpected piece

of information that calls into question their entire epistemological framework up until that moment. (MacIntyre, quoted in Vajpeyi 2012:3)" There are three possible responses to an epistemological crisis. The response that concerns us here is that of an epistemological break with tradition that reorients a tradition in crisis and gives it a new lease of life.

It could be argued that believers in the dominant sociopolitical tradition in the United States think of the American society as being a democratic society where "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is the birthright of every citizen, where various forms of social inequality (including those based on class, race and gender) are diminishing in importance, and where every individual has the opportunity to achieve the American Dream. It could be argued that believers in the dominant sociopolitical tradition in India think of themselves as being part of a nation where social inequalities based on caste, gender and religion are decreasing in importance and giving rise instead to a nation where the identity of a citizen is replacing the salience of other forms of identity.

In the next few paragraphs, I will present a sketch of how the current moment of epistemological crisis and social suffering in the United States and India could also emerge as a moment for the renewal of human responsibility and democratic politics. I will draw upon notions from diverse strands of thought—personalism (a principle of the Catholic Worker tradition and movement in the United States) and *dhamma* (in the Buddhist thought of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar)—that attempt to bridge the gap between the individual self (or individual suffering) and the social self (or social suffering).

Personalism is a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals. Followers of personalism move away from a self-centered individualism toward considerations for the good of the others. This move is to be accomplished by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than expecting the

state or other institutions to provide impersonal "charity" to the underprivileged (*Catholic Worker*, 2019). Peter Maurin, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, stated that the Catholic Workers believed in reconstructing society with "the gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism."

Dhamma means "social responsibility" according to Dr. Ambedkar, the renowned Dalit intellectual who was also the chief architect of the Constitution of India and the founder of a sect of modern Indian Buddhism. For Dr. Ambedkar, social suffering is due to the rigid caste system, and the solution is the annihilation of caste. For him, *duhkha* is not individual suffering rooted in *karma*; rather, *duhkha* is social suffering that results from a caste-based social order (these points regarding Dr. Ambedkar's thought has been discussed in detail by Vajpeyi [2012]). Remarkably, rather than seeking revenge upon the perpetrators of caste-based violence, Dr. Ambedkar envisioned a transformed Indian society where the caste order is annihilated, but "upper-caste" people are not subjected to the politics of retributive justice.

Based on my readings of the meanings of *personalism* and *dhamma*, I would argue that there are three complicated questions facing the residents of United States and India, to which we will have to find answers, as individuals and collectivities. First, in this historical moment/situation of epistemological crisis that may result in a break with political, cultural and social traditions, what are the different ways in which we can visualize and reconstruct societies in the United States and India such that the fight for social justice does not diminish into the politics of revenge but rather seeks the upliftment of all? For, however satisfying violence and revenge may be, let us remember Mahatma Gandhi's statement that 'an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.' Second, in what ways can class-, race-, and caste based unjust social orders give rise to an inclusive and integrating citizenship in these two liberal democratic societies? And, perhaps the most

difficult question of all: can the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship be extended to all residents of a given territory and how do we realize this? Answering these three questions at the level of national societies may take decades, if not centuries, but satisfactory answers will have to be found if the societies of United States and India are to be reconstructed, if we are to markedly lessen social suffering, and if social justice is to be achieved.

References:

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