

# Rekindling Republicanism

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A republic is not just a negation of that quaint institution called monarchy; it is a rejection of arbitrary power in all its forms – political, social and economic. (Illustration by C R Sasikumar)

What exactly do we celebrate on Republic Day? It took me nearly 50 years to figure it out. And I must thank our prime minister for this. Sure, Modi hai to mumkin hai.

As a child, I knew what we celebrated on the 15th of August. Azadi from British raj was not hard to comprehend. For us, 26th of January was more of a gala celebration as we filled the colours of our imagination in the jhankis of the Republic Day radio commentary. In the sarkari function in our town, a pahalwan would move a truck with his teeth. But we didn't quite know what was this ganatantra that we celebrated. It had something to do with the Constitution, we were told.

My civics teacher in Class IX, Master Fateh Chand Goyal, was a Wikipedia on the Indian Constitution, one of the reasons for my abiding interest in political science. He clarified the difference between November 26 (not yet Constitution Day then) and January 26, the day we became a republic. Any country that is not ruled by a hereditary ruler is a republic, he told us. Unlike Britain, still stuck to the bygone institution of the monarchy, we had adopted a republican form of government. The idea of India being one up on

England appealed to me at a time when we lost most of our test matches to their cricket team, but then every other country was also a republic. What was so special about being a republic in this age and time, I asked him. “Bade hokar samjhoge”, he said.

I didn’t, even after I grew up. Once you read Harishankar Parsai’s biting satire, you can never take “Thithurata Hua Ganatantra” (A Shivering Republic) out of your mind on January 26. Recalling his visits to the Republic Day parade, he wondered where the “thunderous applause” in the Akashvani commentary came from, as none of the persons in the enclosures took their hands out of their warm coat pockets in the bitter cold of Delhi. He surmises that the applause must come from those hands whose owners did not have warm clothes to wrap themselves in. His immortal line — “lagta hai, ganatantra thithurate hue hathon ki taliyon par tika hai (apparently, the republic rests on the applause of shivering hands)” — left me scarred for years. It still leaves me with goose bumps. Celebration of the republic was a cold thought.

Narendra Modi’s rise to power and the journey of the last decade made me rediscover the concept of a republic. As we began losing our institutions, our freedoms, our voices and our sanity, I kept looking for the word that could give this loss a name. We were losing democracy and our Constitution, I was told. That was, of course, true, but there was something more this time than the mutilation of constitutional democracy during the dreadful Emergency. We were losing our shared sense of purpose, our collective being, our Indianness. How do we name this momentous loss?

This is when the jhumka suddenly dropped: We are losing our republic. A republic is not just a negation of that quaint institution called monarchy; it is a rejection of arbitrary power in all its forms — political, social and economic. A republican is not someone with a MAGA-lomania. Republicanism connects to a deep political and intellectual tradition in the Euro-Atlantic world, an alternative to liberal-democracy, a radical tradition centred around the ideals of political liberty, popular sovereignty, equal citizenship and civic virtues. Republicanism recalls the key value of our freedom struggle — swaraj in all dimensions of our life — and the political quest of Babasaheb Ambedkar as well as the spirit of gana that informed ancient Indian republics. Indeed, radical republicanism is the underlying philosophy of our Constitution. Now I understood why my civics teacher was so proud of us being a republic.

This realisation took me back to academic — that is, western — political theory after a long gap. I discovered that “republicanism” had staged a comeback. Following the pathbreaking research by Quentin Skinner and JGA Pocock, it was understood that thinkers like Machiavelli were not monarchists but belonged to a robust tradition of civic republicanism, that their understanding of liberty was very different from that of the dominant liberal tradition. Building on this understanding in his book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Philip Pettit redefined liberty as non-domination. In this version, “neo-republicanism” is not just an academic fad, it opens the door for modern democrats to reconnect with the egalitarian, anti-power, impulse of various struggles all over the world. *Radical Republicanism* (edited by Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi and Stuart White) makes this connection across various domains of social, economic and political life in our times.

How does this connect to our political tradition? I turned to Babasaheb Ambedkar, arguably the only democratic theorist of 20th century India, for an answer. His writings on democracy (so ably curated by Christophe Jaffrelot and Narendra Kumar in Dr Ambedkar and Democracy: An Anthology) show a shift from republicanism to a radical republicanism, culminating in this astounding statement (italics in original): “My definition of democracy is ‘a form and a method of government whereby revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought without a bloodshed’”. For him democracy was not merely a political order. A genuine democracy must also be a social order sans hierarchy that is based on a shared sense of community of all citizens. Such a moral order requires a cultivation of civic virtues, an attitude of mind based on equality and liberty, but above all anchored in fraternity or maitree. To avoid any misunderstanding, he declares “Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution... I have derived them from the teachings of my Master, the Buddha.” Radical republicanism comes closest to defining Babasaheb’s democratic theory. No wonder, he founded the Republican Party of India.

This Republic Day must not be about going through the motions of a tired sarkari ritual but about rekindling this spirit of republicanism. Satirist Parsai had proposed that each Republic Day jhanki could display the reality of the state that year: Drought relief scam, corruption scandals, riots, atrocities. In a similar vein, this year UP could be represented by a bulldozer, Maharashtra by a giant washing machine, Haryana with a scene of lynching and Delhi with the images of Umar Khalid and other UAPA detainees without trial. Towards the end, there could be a blank mega TV screen and the statue of justice without a blindfold or eyes. This Republic Day could be a jhanki, a glimpse, of the fracturing of the gana in our ganatantra, the dismantling of our republic.

If republic names what we have lost over the last 10 years, reclaiming the republic must be the clarion call, our shankhanaad, this 26th of January.

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Yours,

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