The Idea of Social Justice
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Abstract
Social justice is the essential virtue of the civilized society. It lays down the foundation of liberal, egalitarian and democratic socio-political and economic order. It seeks to promote societal conditions in which all people, equal in dignity, enjoy proportionally equal access to participation in the social, economic, cultural, civil and political life of society. It emanates from the people’s will to have a harmonious and equitable social life. Social discriminations, gender inequalities, economic exploitation and violation of human rights and human dignity go against the spirit of the social justice. Social justice presupposes the elimination of class and caste based discriminations, promotion of social solidarity and protection of human dignity and interests of weaker sections of society.

Introductory Background:

Social justice is one of the innermost norms of the present day liberal democratic and welfare states. The ideal of social justice is the basic constituent of liberal democratic structure of the society. It is the most tangible, the most easily identifiable and a cardinal attribute of democracy. Democracy is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable and a basic prerequisite for the creation of egalitarian society. Democratic governments concern with the well being of people and the elimination of social injustice. Democracy cannot sustain without social justice. The degree of social justice increases with an increasing degree of democratization of political system. Democratic political regimes promote the cause of social justice on their political agenda more swiftly and
realize the ideal of social justice more effectively than autocratic regimes. Social justice and egalitarian social order together are guiding principles and objectives of welfare state. Dispersion of social justice to citizens is the first and foremost aim of the government. Democratic governments are aimed at to formulate policies, which produce social justice and tend to remove the social discriminations at all levels. Social injustice reflects the inequitable social order, inefficient and maladministration, and lack of will power and capacity of government to provide social justice to people. The modern state’s reason for being and its legitimacy are to a large extent based on the just and equitable distribution or redistribution of the burdens, demands and benefits in society.

Social justice is a subcategory of the wider term justice. It refers to the fair and equitable distribution of valued goods and necessary burdens. Such distributions can take place at all levels of societal aggregation: at the micro level of face-to-face interaction, at the meso (middle range) level of intermediate institutions and organizations, and at the macro level of a society’s basic structure. The ways in which these various levels provide (or deny) access to social positions, in which they regulate the allocation of rights and duties as well as of scarce goods and necessary burdens, and in which they interact through an encompassing framework of institutionalized rules and procedures, form the subject of social justice. Social justice is, in fact, a logical corollary of democratic ideals like liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. These democratic ideals are the foundation stone of just and equitable social order.
Social justice is grounded in the principles of justice. In general, the application of justice aims at giving each person what is due, and implies that members of community or society are concerned with equality, rights of all. Social justice can involve substantive, retributive, corrective, commutative and distributive forms of justice, and although social justice as a term is fairly recent in origin. It was initially an extension of the existing, traditional idea of justice into a new area, that of society as a whole, so that it did not require developing any content new to the idea, but just new conditions for its application. Social justice means that all community members have an equal chance to attain a similar quality of life, measured in terms of physical and mental emotional well being. In a socially just setting, everyone has equal access to the resources necessary for this quality of life, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, socio-economic status, etc. It does not necessarily translate into all community members being wealthy, highly educated, happy or even healthy, rather it means that the ability to access resources and thus attain these ‘conditions’ are equal across community members.

Social justice aims at the creation of a just and harmonious society, where ‘justice’ refers to not only the just governance of laws but also sustainability of societal development. It is based on the idea of a society, which provides fair treatment to individuals and groups and a just sharing of the societal benefits mutually acceptable to a majority. It is concerned not in narrow focus of what is just for the individual alone, but what is just for the social whole. The great mark of social justice is that it cannot
be performed by individuals as individuals, but only by individuals as members of groups.\(^8\) The good society cannot be built from justice alone; justice must be tempered with humanistic concerns for all societal participants.\(^9\) It is used to mean simply certain equality in society, the equality of justice, by which everyone in society gets his due from everyone else. This basic notion has been further determined and often distorted by concrete applications. Some have seen in social justice equality of opportunity, equality of security, equality before the law, equal participation in the good life of the community. Some have understood it to mean the complete equality of wealth.\(^10\)

**Evolution of the Concept of Social Justice:**

Social justice is the most fascinating and yet the most elusive term of the contemporary politics. It is catchword of politicians and reformers, widely applauded on all public occasions, but interpreted by the various sections according to their own hopes and aspirations. The search for social justice is as old as the history of humankind. It seeks the abolition of social discriminations and prejudices. History of humankind is full of struggle against social injustice, discriminations and inequalities. The concept of ‘social justice’ has emerged from the heritage of social injustice and it seeks to remove social disability by birth resulting in social and economic inequalities. It ensures equality of status, equality of opportunity and developmental facilities to all. It has an important social content intended to promote public welfare. It not only provides for a just society, but also removes all parent sources of disunity and disharmony among the people.\(^11\) Social differentiations, injustice and
prejudices are antithetical to the spirit of democracy. Socially, just societies tend to practice real, rather than merely ritualistic democracy. In fair, equitable and humanitarian society, no individuals, groups, or social classes can monopolize the power over other people and the state, by using accumulated wealth to influence the outcome of elections, as it is usually done in socially unjust and non-egalitarian societies.12

The term social justice consists of two terms viz., social and justice. The word ‘social’ implies the obvious reference to society. The word ‘justice’ derives from the Latin term Justitia, which consists of two Latin terms, Jus, meaning law, and itia, translated as –ice. A composite definition of social justice is “a just ordering of society,” or “an ordering of society according to law.”13 Social justice implies a just society wherein all individuals and groups in a society are treated fairly and equally, regardless of caste, creed, colour, race, gender, or any other factor that could be used to create situations of social injustice. The term social justice has been used to mark the idea that distribution of resources and opportunities in a society, as well as its conditions of work, and the patterns of wages and profits, can be evaluated in terms of how well they meet principles of justice.14 Social justice is a state of affairs in which (a) benefits and burdens in a society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle (b) procedures, norms and rules that govern political and other forms of decision making processes which preserve the basic rights, liberties and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c) human beings are treated with dignity and respect not
only by authorities but also by fellow citizens.15

The notion of social justice is a comprehensive and multidimensional. It is essentially devoted to the welfare of human beings. It implies social equality, exclusion of caste-class divisions and elimination of special privileges, protection of human dignity, and liberation of underprivileged, exploited and marginalized sections of society. Since the ancient times, Western and Indian thinkers have given important place to the concept of social justice in their writings. Libertarian theory of social justice considers economic liberty as the essence of social justice. Egalitarian theorists conceptualize the concept of social justice in terms of social equality. Communitarian theory of social justice envisages the concept of social justice in the terms of equal opportunities and the openness of the social system. To Utilitarian theorists, just social order is based on utilitarian maxim i.e. the greatest happiness of the greatest numbers. To Feminist theorists, social justice consists in elimination of gender inequalities. The supporters of capability theory of social justice analyze the concept of social justice in terms of capability of an individual to seek his desired goals. To Marxian theorists, the abolition of economic exploitation of working classes by capitalist class and elimination of institution of private property are the basic requisites of just society.

Universal concepts of justice and social justice developed with the eternal teachings of the world’s great religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Religion determines the socio-economic values, choices and behaviour patterns of an
individual in any society. Religious traditions have played a crucial role in conceptualizing the idea of social equality and social justice and also in responding to perceptions of social injustice, inequalities and prejudices. Every religion support the social justice activities to help the poor and marginalized sections of a society and contribute to create a more humanitarian, fair and equitable societies. 16 All religious traditions substantiate the fact that social justice is required for spiritual as well as social development. Semitic and Aryan religious traditions also confirmed that social justice is a virtue and is central to their socio-religious teachings.

Social justice is also a universal concern. Every government aims at the creation of egalitarian social order. Caste based social divisions, class differentiations, social fragmentations, social exclusion, gender discriminations, violation of human rights, cultural conflicts; religious fundamentalism and disregard for human dignity are the major threats to international peace, security and stability. At the international and national levels, several efforts have been made so far to seek the goal of just social order. At the international level, several attempts have been made to conceptualize the concept of social justice. United Nations has been dealing with the challenges before international community since 1945 and trying to seek the goal of equitable social and economic order at the international level. Various provisions have been laid down in UN Charter related to social justice. UN Charter aims at creating just social order at international level.

In India, the constitution makers had made several
constitutional provisions to redress the grievances of weaker, underprivileged, downtrodden and vulnerable sections of society. Since the independence, every government at the central and provincial levels has strived for egalitarian social order. Indian Constitution also contains many provisions for social justice. It places social justice higher than political and economic justice. In the Part III of Constitution, which deals fundamental rights, there are special provisions for social justice. Apart from it in Part IV of Constitution, Directive principles provides guidelines to political leaders and policy makers to formulate the policies in the spirit of social justice.

The concept of “social justice” is multifaceted. Social justice tends to create an egalitarian society or institution that is based on the principles of social equality. Social justice requires an egalitarian distribution of resources. Casteless society, classless society, gender equality, social solidarity and human dignity are the foundational principles of the concept of social justice. Egalitarian society prevails only when people have the benefits of equality irrespective of their caste, class, creed, colour and gender. Social justice presupposes the social conditions in which individual lives in harmony with dignity. Intellectually, it means the acceptance of every human being not as a means, but as an end. The idea of social equality is central to the concept of social justice.

Conclusion:

Social justice is an essential prerequisite of democratic polity. Social injustice is antithetical to the idea of modern day liberal democratic state. The present day welfare state ensures the elimination of all kinds of social inequalities, discriminations,
prejudices and exploitation. Social justice implies an egalitarian, liberal and fair social order in which self-esteem of an individual is protected and aims at the eradication of social unfairness. Socially just society is primarily a classless and casteless society. Social justice also implies due care of rights of women, socio-cultural and religious minorities and vulnerable sections of society.

References:


