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Seminar series: “Advancing Citizenship the role of Leaders and Rule of Law”

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I thank the Department of Sociology of the University of Poona for inviting me to speak before you. This has been a long time waiting for I have quite keen to be in the University of Pune and to interact with my old friends here. I am particularly honoured today because I have two very distinguished sociologists in the audience, people like whom I admire from a distance and from up-close, Professor Dhanagare and Professor Bohite, and many old friends. With some luck on my side, I am hoping to make some new friends too before the day is done.

The topic that we have chosen for this afternoon is a very difficult one and I don't know why I acceded to it, in a weak moment perhaps. But this is a theme that really sends shivers up my spine, for it forces us to think outside our discipline without forsaking it. I have often argued that all interdisciplinary ventures are really very good ideas as long as one is firmly anchored in one's own discipline. Often, inter-disciplinary studies result in looking the lowest common denominator, a bit of it and a bit of that, which I don't think is the right way to conceptualize such efforts.

I hope to be inter-disciplinary, in the better sense of the term, when I argue today that as sociologists we can indeed take citizenship forward, in theory and practice. Like Professor Shruti Tambe just said, we should be proud of what our discipline has given us and, indeed, I am feel very privileged in being a sociologist and having learnt from some of the best minds in this field. I hope that by the end of the day you will not think this pride is mistakenly placed.

To return to our subject of how one might advance citizenship and, with that, democracy, I must begin by saying that we are today in interesting times. Very often people say that our democracy is in crisis and they worry about it, they lament about it and I respond by saying, 'well, tell me a time when democracy was not in crisis?' In fact because democracy has always been in crisis that democracy has grown and evolved. So, as far as I am concerned, “crisis” is a good thing and can have very positive outcomes.

Think this matter through as sociologists. Our discipline grew over decades, perhaps, over a century, because we engaged with crises at different junctures. If you are not in crisis, you won't develop as a sociologist. Professor Bohite was just telling me this in the car just now, that a good sociologist is one who is inherently restless. This is a very accurate; and you know both he and Professor Dhanagare have been restless all their lives which is why they are such renowned scholars. I think democracy too is very much like an academic enterprise. If you are not in crisis the warning bells should immediately sound.

Now why do I say this? I say this because I think democracy is a very tough act; it's not easy at all. Many peddlers of democracy will tell you that democracy is a natural thing; you vote, do your homework, and that is it. Not at all! There are other forms of political governance which are much easier and very natural; guess what they are? Monarchy, Fascism, racism, apartheid, these are really easy. With some gumption and guts, any adventurer and ego obsessed person can aspire to lead such regimes. But if you are talking about democracy, everything changes and the going gets tough.

A little reflection will tell you that democracy is the most contrived and artificial human arrangements ever, and why is that so? This is because democracy is all about balance. When this balance goes wrong it needs to be righted and every such act advances democracy. Interestingly, whenever democracy rights itself from a situation of imbalance it not only changes the status quo, but also invites another crisis, and then again, another conscious attempt at correction. With each such move democracy gains a lot, and so does citizenship.

Today, most of us take the legacy that citizenship has bequeathed us in India, and in the democratic world, more or less for granted, and that is a mistake. These forward steps took a lot of doing and very conscious interventions by human agency. These gains were all hard one and came about because people with immense intellectual commitment and political perspicacity lead these movements. That is the reason why we are here today facing each other with dignity as "citizens".

The central reason why, democracy is a difficult act is because of a human trait that sociology and anthropology have brought to our notice. Sadly, human beings around the world, regardless of space, time, economic position or whatever, believe uniformly that their culture, community, religion or customs are the best. Everybody else is the second

best. So whether you are a Kung San tribal from the Kalahari Desert, or you are in the Chinese Middle kingdom, or from Banaras, or the Pueblo from Nevada, everybody, everywhere, think that that they are the best. The Kachins know there are Shans and the Burmese that live contiguous to them, yet consider these communities to be less evolved; perhaps they have the tail stuck in somewhere. are. So, regardless of what you are; where you are; what position you occupy; what stage of history you are in, this is a human failing across the world. As it is so universal in scope I have been tempted to call it a “sociological truism”.

This aspect loomed large in my studies on caste in India. When one considers how different castes think of one another, it so turns out that each one of them believe they are the best, at least, intrinsically so. And if they are not on top of the heap right now it's simply because some chance misfortune took place in history, often really in times so ancient, that we may call them mythical. They had either lost a war; or some community stabbed them in the back; even our gods, with their idiosyncratic ways, could have played unfairly with them. But the distilled fact that remains is that no caste believes it is inferior to any other.

Now, what does that sentiment leave behind? It leaves behind a mountain to climb if democracy is to be the governing political credo. This is a job that cannot be taken lightly, nor does it come naturally. Why? As the central tenet of democracy is fraternity, it goes against the sociological truism we just mentioned. Quite clearly, fraternity is not a natural condition in us. The natural condition in us is what I just mentioned to you whereby we spontaneously divide ourselves making, what Claude Levi-Strauss once said, cultural differences appear as if they were natural ones. If other people are different from us it because their natural composition makes them that way. This is a deep seated prejudice that fraternity must fight so that we can emerge as citizens in a democracy.

Daunting as this task is, it must be accomplished for the sake of citizenship. This is where the concept of “fraternity” becomes an operative term and not a loose suggestion of goodwill. We have all heard about liberty, equality and fraternity, and often club the three together as a non-problematic trident. That is strictly not correct. Liberty and equality are, I think, relatively easier targets to achieve because you can get them through enforcement of legal provisions. You can say, for example, that everybody should get the same salary; or one must get a fair trial. But you cannot get fraternity by

law. Fraternity, in the truest sense, is like a very delicate plant; it has to be nurtured carefully and requires constant attention. If you take your eyes off it, some pestilence will almost certainly strike it. All around us the natural condition which is informed by the “sociological truism” exists and that is from where the threats will come. The forces of caste, community and gender will, singly or in combination, attack democracy at the roots if we are not watching out for them. This is why one must always be alert; alert against ourselves for our many frailties. So often we fail to recognize inadequacies that lie within us.

We have all grown up worshipping Ambedkar. Some worship him for his crusade against untouchability; others for leading the New Buddhist movement, and so on. He was a man of many facets, each equally admirable. But I worship him most for his contribution during the period when he was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of our Constitution. At that time what he did was, I think, not just cerebral, but historically amazing. I can't imagine anybody doing that kind of work, and under those conditions, the way Ambedkar did, and did brilliantly!

The thing that really won me over regarding Ambedkar's leadership in those years was his advocacy that fraternity is, and should always be, the central principal of democracy. This was truly a very difficult task; it was much easier, then as now, in chalking up successes in the areas of “liberty” and “equality”. Even his insistence on uplifting Scheduled Caste was not charity or simple goodwill, but informed by the singular demands of fraternity. This hold true for the provisions in our Constitution regarding minority protection as well. It was not a warm and hugging inclination out of which our Constitution established these freedoms and rights, but because of the unrelenting call of fraternity. It is because we believe that fraternity is central that the Constitution of India is what it is. Hopefully, in the fullness of time it may not be necessary to be self-conscious about them for the disposition towards fraternity might well become a habit. That, however, is a long time away, which is why democracy demands that we are constantly watchful and on our toes.

All of this implies that democracy is a perpetual utopia and something to constantly strive for. Once people begin to believe that democracy is natural, or that democracy has accomplished it all, there is trouble ahead. In fact, the many crises democracy has faced over the years is precisely because people have fallen into lazy ways of thinking. Democracy needs utopia after utopia to reach out to and achieve all the time; it can

never rest. Otherwise, there is not just the danger of stagnation, but of a negative dystopia setting in. I recall at this point two very important statements made by Karl Fichte, the famous German philosopher. First, if you think that something is right, is really, really right and if your heart says so and not the market or peer pressure, then that just has to be right. This is why I advise young students working for a research degree that if they believe that the problem they want to study is the right one, they should have faith in themselves. The subject of investigation may have to be finessed, chopped and refined, but the original inspiration is the real thing.

The second point for which I am indebted to Fichte is when he said that the human condition is one where the moment you surmount an obstacle you set up another; and when you surmount that, there is another hill out there you just have to climb; and the process never ends. So human beings are built to create utopias and achieve them in a never ending process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Subsequent scholars like Hegel and Marx used this idea effectively later.

Likewise, a democracy too needs its thesis, antithesis and synthesis to power its engines endlessly. If we give up creating new challenges and surmounting them, democracy will not just suffer, but will begin a downward slide. At that point, dystopia will set in and this is what we have seen happen over the last 50 years or so. To a large extent, dystopia began to grow large in democracies during these decades on account of the cold war. The sentiments that rose to the fore in this period marginalized democracy and centralized the economy instead.

So if you were a certified killer but an advocate of capitalism, then as far as America and its friends were concerned, you were on the side of angels. On the other hand, if you were a mass murderer but favoured communism then for those aligned with the then Soviet Union, you were a progressive and on the side of history. In all of this, nobody really cared about the democracy and the fundamentals of fraternity. This is the major factor for the slow advance of democracy in the last half of the previous century. Wherever, and whenever, democracy advanced it was always by digging deep into the potentialities of fraternity. Over past hundred years or more, the deepening of democracy has happened because new utopias were set by its practitioners. These included the extension of franchise, minority rights, workers' rights, social welfare privileges, and so on. None of these happened in one swift motion, but at each historical juncture democracy realized something new about itself. These treasures were hidden

in its capacious fold and earlier generations hadn't suspected that they even existed. Though these breakthroughs began in a particular country, over time they quickly spread to other parts of the democratic world. The cold war put this process in deep freeze and, hopefully, the thawing out process will soon begin. We see signs of this awakening in recent years with the advancement of gay and lesbian rights, a fact that earlier democrats never quite countenanced. But this is how fraternity grows; there is always deliberate act of breaking new ground, digging out new riches, excavating new truths. All of this should make the point that dystopia is perpetually waiting in the wings, ready to strike. The moment we give up on utopian visions, it quickly steps in, but always by stealth.

Some of us have been conditioned to believe that utopia is a bad word? But sociology, properly speaking, is respectful of utopia and, in fact, has understood epochal transitions through this lens. I am at this point thinking pointedly of Karl Mannheim and his work, Ideology and Utopia. In his view, a utopia is a projection of a future that is eminently realizable and, therefore, quite in contrast to fantasies. It is not a pie in the sky, but something that can be put to work on the ground. It is only when this condition is met that utopias qualify for our attention as sociologists and blow our hair back. You now have a dream that you can seek out and possess. Look back and you will find that the great stellar figures in democracy have often dreamt these utopias and convinced others that they were worthwhile. At the end, when they realized their goals, democracy took a great leap forward.

In India, we had utopias too; you might not believe this given the contemporary scene here, but we indeed had them once. Remember Mahatma Gandhi? When he said that he was against untouchability; what was that? Answer: It was pure utopia as at that time who ever imagined that it was possible to go against one of the central tenets of caste in practice. The very thought of making those who were considered "untouchable" equal citizens must have been anathema to the majority of Hindus. Yet Gandhi pressed on with this utopia and finally won it. He did not yield to popular prejudice but stuck it out in the name of citizenship.

Gandhi was Fichtean in that sense; he was convinced he was right and he was not afraid of setting up targets that others shrank away from. A democrat advances fraternity not by listening to people, but by pushing masses in the direction of citizenship, which is always a conscious effort. If Gandhi had gone with a paper and pencil and asked for

opinions on this issue, most Hindus would say, “No; No; Never.” This reality, however, did not deter him for he had a citizenship utopia in his mind. He fought for it, wrote about it, organized meetings and discussions over this and then, eventually, when India became Independent, he got his utopia.

It was utopian thinking again that guaranteed minority protection in our Constitution and also made for women to occupy public spaces. In fact, much of what we find in our Constitution was first initiated by Gandhi. He was not a saint who strayed into politics, nor a man given to obstinate idiosyncrasies. This is the kind of image that many put forward, and they believe they are being sympathetic to the Mahatma, but they miss the point. Gandhi was a great democrat who dreamed utopias and fought to attain them. The film, “Gandhi” by David Attenborough did not bring out this point either.

I also see Jawaharlal Nehru as a utopian democrat. He fought for the Hindu Marriage Act and, in that process, he went against the practice of polygamy among Hindu men who saw nothing wrong with it. Unlike, dictators and monarchs, utopian democrats convince the majority, who are generally not in step with them, that they should make room for citizenship. It takes time and patience. These democrats do not say, as Louis XVI had once declared, “It is the law because I say so.” Not always, either, do these utopian democrats succeed, but what they once started often gets picked up later and is then empirically realized. This was true in the case of workers’ rights and adult franchise; though today these measures seem to be the most natural features of democracy. At the time it was a struggle to put them in place and we should, therefore, be grateful to those who had the courage to dream.

Just look back at the early days of democracy. The provisions in the 13th Century *Magna Carta* seem so primitive today, even though some believe that it was with the establishment of this agreement between the kings and the nobles of England that democracy began. If the kinds of Constitutions and laws in modern democracies are far ahead of what the *Magna Carta* provided for, we must admit that human agency has, time and again, strained to make a difference. Not just adult franchise, but the abolition of child labour, universal health and education, pension and social service networks, and a whole slew of similar provisions in advanced democracies of today are all stunning achievements of democratic leadership.

Previous centuries could never have dreamt of such institutions and if anybody were to voice them, millions would howl them down as utopians. Who would have thought in the mid 19th century that women must have the right to vote? Who would have thought that Blacks in South Africa would one day live in an apartheid free country? Who would have thought, even twenty years back, that gays and lesbians have equal rights to express their sexual orientation? Now these measures are par for the course in most democracies and we are not struck by them any longer. So when I think of democracy I think of leadership, I think of adventure, I think of people who are willing to take risks and unless you take risks; you can never be rewarded.

Most of the significant advances in democracy were stoutly resisted when they were first brought up. Earl Gray, for example, lost initially in his attempt to broaden franchise, but it happened later. Robert Peel, in his first round as Prime Minister, failed to abolish the Corn Law, but managed to do so when he came back the second time. Benjamin Disraeli's cabinet was full of crusty aristocrats but he set in place far reaching changes in urban conditions and employment terms for workers. The Insurance Act that David Lloyd George got going was also resisted by many but eventually went through. In this, the arch conservative, Winston Churchill, backed him to the hilt.

Who were the feminists who led the suffragette movement? Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst, for example, were from the elite quarters of British society. So your class does not always determine your political interests. We know that Mao Tse Tung wasn't really a deprived person, but without the help of people like Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai, who came from well-to-do backgrounds, he would perhaps not have succeeded in making the Chinese Revolution. Lenin came from an aristocratic family, as did Prince Kropotkin and, in both cases, they went against the class they were born into. So regardless of background and birth, very often democrats thought citizenship and not self interest, and stepped forward to advance fraternity. The riches of citizenship were hidden under mounds and mounds of dirt and filth. But it is the leaders who lead the dig and when you see them in full splendour you are tempted to say, "But of course."

At this point I need to draw in a very recent experience. I was lucky that a good friend of mine brought to my notice how the Basque province of Spain had advanced dramatically in 20 years after the death of General Franco. Till 1980, Basque Spain was the poorest region in one of the poorer countries of Europe. Not any longer. It is now second to Germany on most human development indices and occupies the first position

in terms of doctor-patient ratio and in the European Innovation Index. Accomplishments of such a high order do not come easy. What was the secret then behind the success of the Basque region? How did it become the most the most shining part of Europe after being way down for decades?

The first Finance Minister of Basque province told me that they were able to get their region out of poverty by simply emphasising “citizenship”. At a time when they were desperately poor and under developed, the new leadership, after the dictator General Franco was no more, put their might into advancing health, education, science and research. Most economists would tell you that this is complete madness, but the new leaders of Basque believed in a utopia. Once again, it was the sheer energy, determination of the new democratic Basque province that made a difference to the every day lives of people there. The Basque leaders had to correct years of misrule under General Franco. He even had Basque people bombed in Guernica (in Basque country; and which inspired Picasso’s painting bearing the same title) so that his German friends could test the payload in their fighter planes.

It is only after Franco left this world that the Basque people got a chance to breathe free and exercise their will. They chose not to express the historic injustices against them in angry, identity terms, but by showing the world that their democracy is just about the best there is. There is a serious lesson in all this. Very often we argue that we are not progressing because we have a democracy, but so did Basque Spain, and look how they pulled it off. Dictatorships are not usually efficient which is why the idea of wielding a stick and getting people in line is so abhorrent to those who uphold “citizenship”. To those of us who are still not convinced, think of the Basque region and read about their progress. It is also democracy that realized the potentialities in the industrial revolution; democracy brought about advancements in management systems that are central to corporate functioning today; and it was democracy again, that let loose the knowledge explosion. So before anybody runs down democracy, think of what it has given us and how extraordinary its impact has been in every thing we do.

Finally, democracy is a balance, a fine balance, between the rule of law and the rule of numbers. If it were just the rule of law we could have had a monarchy, dictatorship, anything, but democracy. If it were only a rule of numbers we could have had pure fascism; Hitler, after all, was elected to the post of Fuehrer. In the same way, the modern economy too is a balancing act. It has prospered not because of capitalists but

because of “entrepreneurs”, as Joseph Schumpeter had pointed out long ago. There is a balancing act going on there as well for behind every innovation, there stands the law in the form of regulation. After all, society comes before the economy, as Durkheim famously pointed out to Herbert Spencer.

Is it then too much to ask that we should also like our country to be a leading one not by the force of a stick or blunderbuss, but through the mechanisms provided to us by democracy? Foremost among the interventions that is required to take fraternity forward is to provide for universal health and universal education, just as the Basque province had done, and just as the most advanced countries in Europe did years back. There is always the money, as the history of democracy shows us; the point is to use it efficiently for citizenship. Sweden was very poor in the 1930s. It could not feed over a million people during those years, but it was at that time that they started investing in social welfare schemes. This was equally true of Austria after the First World War. Canada’s universal health scheme began in the 1940s in Saskatchewan because of all the provinces of that country this one fared the worst during the war in economic terms. Britain too, institutionalized the National Health Service at a time when its economy was ravaged by World War II. So not having the money to advance measures central to fraternity and citizenship is a very lame excuse.

Today, there is an urgent need for our leaders to think citizenship and not just votes and electoral victories. But what is citizenship? Here I can do no better than echo T. H Marshall. According to him citizenship confers equality of status on everybody upon which then one can go ahead and build structures of inequality. But first of all, as Marshall insisted, provide at base substantive equality and that, in my view, can only come with universal health and universal education. In such a system your child, my child and gardener’s child goes to same school; just as your mother, my mother, and the gardener’s mother would go to same hospital. Universal health and education is, therefore, not the same as health for the poor or education for the poor. These schemes never work for they are targeted to a certain population and are not citizenship friendly. As a result such policies end up providing poor health and poor education. But for universal health and universal education to prosper, you first need a campaign. It’s not just giving money; you need to look out for where this money is going? How is it being used? Is it Inclusive in its scope taking in all citizens alike?

The time for India taking another leap in democracy has come and we should not let it go. Forget about our traditional past, even the country we knew after Independence has undergone immense changes. We no longer live in a land of villages, not only because we are urbanizing rapidly, but also because village India is transforming at a fast pace too. Today, it is said that about 64% of the rural net domestic product in India comes from non-agrarian occupations. In simple words, well above half the economy of the countryside today is not dependent on farm based incomes.

Almost every village in India has a number of workshops producing all kinds of things, from brassware, to mirror work, to carpets, to cotton fabrics, and the list just goes on. Nor is it that such activities are taking place in advanced districts of India; in fact, poorer regions like Mirzapur and Bhadohi (or Sant Ravidas Nagar), in east Uttar Pradesh, constitute the carpet belt of the country. The poor weaver there is linked by a long supply chain, and several intermediaries, to markets in London, New York, Paris and Stockholm.

The aspirations of poor people have also changed remarkably. As rural India is ceasing to be agricultural in character, parents are investing more heavily than they did before in their children's education. Today, roughly 21% of village kids go to private schools whereas in 1980 hardly anyone did. The predictability of routine life that dominated rural India is no longer there, primarily because people are thinking differently now. Urban India is not that far away and, what is more, there is so much "urban activity" happening in the village itself. That about 67% of the population lives in rural India should not blind us to the fact that the people there are not tied to land, or primarily dependent on farm-based occupations.

Yet, when these parents invest so heavily, disproportionate to their incomes, in seeking education for their children, are they being suitably served? Far from it. Studies show that about 40% of those in private schools cannot read, write or compute sums in line with their age and grade in class. That this number goes up by at least 15% in government schools only makes matters worse. However, what all of these show is that education for the poor, or just setting up a school in a village is not enough; we must pay attention to standards. That, however, will happen only if education is delivered universally keeping citizenship in mind and not just poverty.

Likewise, with health. Over 30 million go below the poverty line every year on account of medical expenses. About 25% of ailing people in India do not even seek help because they cannot afford it. Sadly, our government spends only about 1% of its GDP on health, whereas the average in Europe is 8%. We have just noticed how investments in this sector have boosted the health profile of the Basque in a little over two decades. The people of India are waiting for leadership to make substantial citizenship status available to them. That can only happen if we follow Marshall's dictum that was mentioned earlier. First and foremost, provide opportunities for everybody to be equal at start and let them be unequal later. To initiate this process then, let us begin with universal health and education, and for this we need our leadership to act.

In the end, I do hope that the call of citizenship rings loud and does not fall on tin years. I do hope that some people like you here in the audience, would become force behind taking citizenship forward in our country. India and Indians are waiting!

Thank you.