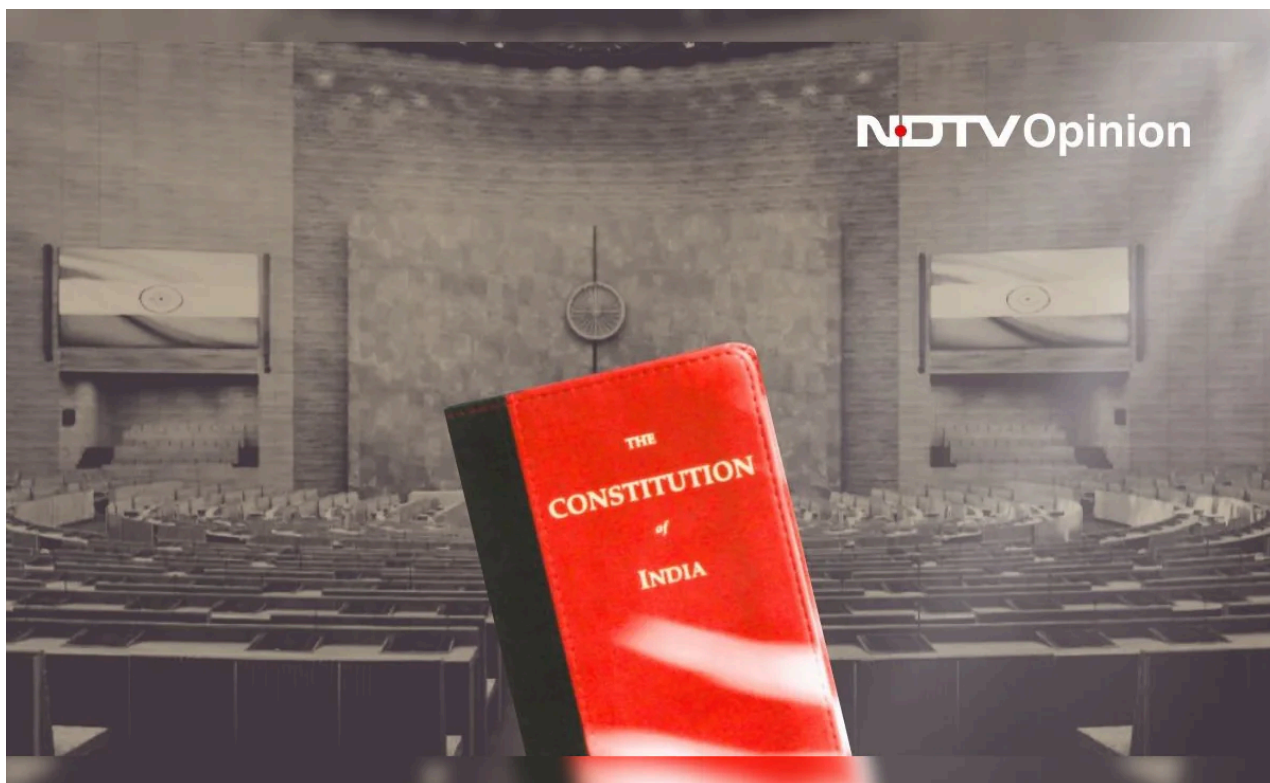


Optics Of Pocketbook Constitution, Opposition's Current Favourite Book

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A few legislators these days, especially those from opposition parties, are increasingly seen holding a small book in their hands. It's a pocketbook version of the Constitution of India, with a red cover and a black spine. The symbolism of these optics is intended to show their allegiance to the Constitution, as also their political opposition to the ruling alliance.

The optics emerged in response to the ruling political party's ambitious call to secure an unprecedented "400 paar" [more than 400 seats] majority in the Parliament - a majority that the Opposition alleged would have made amending the Constitution easier for the ruling alliance. Opposition leaders even declared a threat to the Constitution as they sloganeered "*samvidhan khatre mein hai*" [the Constitution is in danger].

This year's electoral outcome has gone on to make the pocketbook Constitution a common sight in India's Parliamentary democracy. The core messaging of this optics is to uphold the protection of minorities and caste-based affirmative action /reservations in India.

How To Maintain Democracy

In a famous 1949 speech, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, chairperson of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India, posed the question: If we wish to maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, what must we do? He said, "In politics, *Bhakti* or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

Dr Ambedkar also said, "We must not be content with mere political democracy." He predicted that an emerging India of the time would have political equality (that is, universal adult franchise, one-person-one-vote), but deep and pervasive social inequality (that is, some people's lives would be more valuable than the others'). Dr Ambedkar famously called this "a life of contradictions".

Resolving A Life Of Contradictions

The life of contradictions has endured for over seven decades, and it calls for a deep reflection on our societal and political structures. In his 1949 speech, Dr Ambedkar spoke about resolving the contradiction. How can an impending life of contradictions be averted?

"We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy," he said.

"What does social democracy mean?" Dr. Ambedkar posed this question in that speech, and explained, "It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life."

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"What does fraternity mean?" Dr Ambedkar asked himself, and explained, "It is the principle which gives unity and solidarity to social life. [...] In India there are castes. The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life."

Caste And Constitution

Caste is a fundamental unit of inequality in India. It continues to be a site of Constitutional remediation. The pre-election rhetoric of a "Constitution-under-threat" perhaps delivered its message most effectively to Dalit, Adivasi, and Bahujan voters, who are directly affected by caste-based inequalities. The optics of the pocketbook Constitution have outlasted electoral campaigning by now. Many politicians are seen with this pocketbook in their hands.

It's a gimmick. It's intended to attract attention. The Constitution of India is famously lengthy; it is, in fact, one of the longest-written constitutions in the world. The optics of a pocketbook Constitution in anyone's hands does not imply they have read it or are

interested in wading through this lengthy text. Yet, the optics have given an unprecedented tangible form to the Constitution. It has popularised the ideas of Constitutionalism.

But What Is Constitutionalism?

It is the practice of establishing, adhering to, and respecting a system of constitutional governance. It's an abstract idea that affects everyone and rarely presents itself in tangible form - in popular cultures and imaginations. Movies like *Article 15* (2019) have generated the optics, amplified the text of Article 15, and popularised the idea of non-discrimination. The iconography of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar with the Constitution in his hand - a larger-sized book - is also common in Dalit sub-cultures.



Printed copies of this poster (16"x 12") are commonly sold at roadside stalls in India, especially on Ambedkar Jayanti.

There's nothing to begrudge the optics. However, it has become a sore point among the ruling political parties in the Parliament of India because of perhaps the implied perception that they are anti-constitutional somehow. The remark of the Speaker of Lok Sabha at Shashi Tharoor's salutation to the Constitution ("*Jai Samvidhan*") is perhaps an example of this political soreness.

The optics, nonetheless, are good for spreading aspirational ideals of constitutionalism in popular cultures and imaginations. Even if it is momentary and the politicians discard the ideals when they do not favour them, this moment will endure in the collective memories and consciousness of a rising social democracy in India. *Jai Samvidhan. Jai Bhim.*

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