



RESOLVING THE POLITICAL DEADLOCK OF DEPRESSED CLASSES IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract

The militant nationalist movement has ultimately been stabilized into the generation of democratic institutions earlier in 20th century in colonial India. This has accelerated the process of politicizing the castes in a tradition bound caste ridden feudal society as a way for sharing the political power. The untouchable castes who were condemned to the lowest rung of Hindu society started political awakening asking for political representation for their elevation. The principle of separate electorates for representing various sects of society was already introduced by the government. The same demand in different forms was forwarded by the untouchables. Gandhiji opposed any form of representation for untouchables as they are being an integral part and parcel of Hindu society and assumed the problem as social within the Hindu fold to be resolved by the sincere efforts of social reformists. Dr. Ambedkar lost all his faith in reforms and followed the path of materialism by asking political reservation for the untouchables. The struggle between the two leaders over the problem has ultimately been set right in the form of Poona Pact which recognized the principle of reservation of seats in general constituencies which forwarded in the independent constitution of India.



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An introduction of modern scientific tools in all respects of align rulers had paved a path for transmitting feudal order to modern Indian society in 19th century resulting into socio-economic-political transformation. It was the first time in history that the steel frame of caste system was attacked by the long cherished policies of align rule. The social reform movement was the resultant part and parcel. Initially the century was dominated by the efforts for social reforms; and subsequently in the last phase by the political movement. However, the severe attack on the part of Extremists under the leadership Tilak caused a severe blow to the efforts for social reforms which turned into the dichotomy social Vs political reforms.

Mahatma Gandhi seemingly resolved the earlier dichotomies like secularism Vs religion and social Vs political reforms as a part of his compact anti-colonial policy so as to enlarge the social base of national movement by uniting all divergent sections of Indian society. The problem of Untouchables, who were debarred from all walks of life, was

crystallized on political horizon particularly with the advent of the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar in 20s of 20th century. The Act of 1909 and 1919 had provided separate representation to all the minority sections of Indian society except to the Untouchables. Gandhiji had assumed the problem of Untouchables as religious problem and not that of political one supposing such class as an integral part of Hindu fold.

The Depressed Classes' Organizations started demanding of political safeguards for the Depressed Classes' in fourth coming constitution of 1919.¹ Dr. Ambedkar pleaded before Southborough Commission for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes as being treated them an independent political entity.² The act of 1919 provided them the principle of nominations in legislatures by recognizing it an independent political entity.³ The Indian National Congress first time in 1917 recognized such community as Depressed and assured for its betterment. On the background of Satyagraha movements at Mahad and Nasik, Dr. Ambedkar emerged as a national leader of the Depressed Classes who demanded joint electorates with reservation of seats for such community in his memorandum submitted to Simon Commission in 1928.⁴ Here he did not emphasis on separate electorates. However, the Commission had disappointed him.⁵ The Nehru Committee Report was against both separate electorates or nominations for reserved seats as harmful to the progress of Depressed Classes.⁶

On this background Dr. Ambedkar was nominated as a representative of the Depressed Classes on the Round Table Conference to be held in England for pleading his views regarding political safeguards for his people. In his speech in RTC on November 24, 1930 he said that, 'the Depressed Classes form a ground by themselves which was distinct and separate from Muslims and other communities as well. Their population was one-fifth of the total British India. They were included among the Hindus. However, they were in no sense an integral part of that community. According to him "this amounted to a positive denial of all equality of opportunity and the denial of those most elementary of civic rights on which all human existence depends."⁷ He further observed, "We are often reminded that the problem of Depressed Classes is a social problem and that its solution lies elsewhere than in politics. We take strong exception to this view. We hold that the problem of the Depressed Classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their own hands."⁸ Dr. Ambedkar demanded separate electorates for his community for first ten years subsequently joint electorates with reservations.⁹

Gandhiji had participated in the second Round Table Conference on Sept. 7, 1931 in which he said that the Congress had represented all divergent social groups of Indian society;

and so far as Depressed Classes are concerned, Congress since its inception taken up their cause which was enlarged since 1920.¹⁰ However, he recorded his total opposition to the political separation from the Hindus to be provided them any sort of political representation, that would be ‘absolutely suicidal.’¹¹ Gandhiji agreed that only because of strong historical reasons the Congress has extended the principle of special political treatment to Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs; however, it would not be extended to the Depressed Classes¹² as these classes constituted part and parcel of Hindu society. The reason forwarded for his opposition was that it would create perpetual turmoil and commotion in the whole country and peace would be hampered.¹³ Hence, the problem will be resolved within the Hindu fold of society. Finely Gandhi warned that he would resist the special political representation for the Depressed Classes ‘with his life.’ After coming back to India, the British Government arrested him and sent to the Yerwada Jail where from there in his letter to the British Premier he reiterated the same opinion.¹⁴

On August 17, 1932 the British Prime Minister, Mac Donald had announced Separate Electorates for the Depressed Classes as well as granted them right to vote in general constituencies being as an integral part of Hindu society.¹⁵ However, this system of separate electorates was to be continued for twenty years if not abolished earlier. In his letter on August 18, 1932, Gandhiji had warned the British Prime Minister that to get the terms of award revised and threatened that if the Government does not withdraw the separate electorates for the Depressed classes, he would ‘go on fast unto death.’ In reply the Prime Minister observed, ‘We felt of our duty to safeguard what we believe to be the right of the depressed Classes to a fair proportion of representation in the legislatures, we were equally careful to do nothing that would split off their community from the Hindu world. You yourself stated in your letter of March 11, that you were not against their representation on the Legislatures.’¹⁶ Reacting Gandhiji’s stance Dr. Ambedkar argued that the similar arrangement of separate electorates for Shikhs and Muslims is harmless how it be harmful when extended to Depressed Classes.¹⁷ Ultimately Gandhiji got ready for revised form for political representation of Depressed Classes and stated, ‘My fast is only against separate electorates and not against statutory reservation of seats.’¹⁸

Dr. Ambedkar was aware of the potential danger lurking in Gandhiji’s fast. It was expected to widen the gap between the Touchable and Untouchables and make reactionary forces aggressive against the Untouchables. He, therefore, agreed to get ready to consider Gandhiji’s proposal of statutory reservation of joint electorates for the Depressed Classes.¹⁹ This has generated positive dialogues between the nationalist leaders (Caste Hindus) and

Untouchables under the leadership Pandit Madanmohan Malviya and Dr. Ambedkar respectively and after two days lengthy negotiations between both the parties ultimately arrived to an agreement on Sept. 24, 1932 which is known as 'Poona Pact.' This new arrangement provided joint electorates with reservation of seats in provincial legislatures (148 seats) and 18 percent sets in central legislatures along with the method of getting elected four persons belonging the Depressed classes in primary elections out of one is to be elected in reserve constituency for both caste Hindus and Untouchables. This arrangement was incorporated in the constitutional Act of 1935. This principle of representation with reservation for the Scheduled Caste has been incorporated in Independent constitution of India, by deleting the arrangement of primary election.

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