



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Thoughts on Just Representation of the Dalits in Colonial India

S.R. Seelam, Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, RTM Nagpur University, Maharashtra.

Abstract. The objective of Ambedkar's insistence on various safeguards for the Dalits including separate electorates since 1919 was to enable them to ventilate their grievances and obtain redress. Evidently, the Poona Pact prevented this process from happening. The reservation policy based on the Poona Pact, 1932, was promulgated in the Government of India Act 1935. The Act reserved seats for the Dalits in the central and state legislatures and later on incorporated into the Constitution of India. Thus, the paper argues, Ambedkar gradually succeeded in securing safeguards for the Dalits and extending the reservation policy to the excluded humanity at all India level.

Keywords. Ambedkar, Gandhi, Dalits, Minorities, Christians, Muslims, Reservations, Separate Electorate, Poona Pact, 1935 Act, Indian Constitution.

Introduction

Ambedkar's contribution to the Dalits liberation in colonial India was very significant. He thought that there should be some legal provisions regarding Dalit rights. Certain significant provisions should be in social and economic domain and special safeguards for empowering them in services and decision making bodies including legislatures. In fact, the Act of 1909 provided communal representation for the Muslims; The Sikhs and Europeans were included in the 1919 Act; and the 1935 Act annexed Anglo Indians and Indian Christians. Ambedkar brought proposal of separate electorates for the Dalits in front of the South Borough Franchise Committee in 1919. He claimed that the Dalits are minority in different terms, therefore, they need special status and specific safeguards to sustain on their own. Ambedkar was a member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Constitutional Reforms from 1932 to 1934. To prepare for the elections to the

provincial legislatures, Ambedkar formed the Independent Labour Party to safeguard the interests of the Dalits. He organised and awakened them and was successful in his mission when many of his demands were incorporated into the Government of India Act, 1935. In August 1937, he introduced Khoti and Abolition of Mahar Watan Bill (Kuber 2001: 20-23). Ambedkar, as Labour Member of the Executive Council, safeguarded the rights of the Dalits from 1942 to 1946. He laid the foundation for the Government's labour policy. He advised the British to provide economic and educational facilities and adequate employment to the untouchable Dalits. He demanded that the Dalits should be given equal status with Muslims and Hindus in the future constitution. He submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission in 1946 regarding the rights, liberties and safeguards to be included in the future constitution for the emancipation of Dalits after withdrawal of the British from India. He declared that the Dalits would never allow a



Swaraj Government, unless the untouchables were given proper place and power.

The Scheme of Separate Electorates

In 1929, Ambedkar submitted a report concerning joint electorates and adult franchise to the Simon Commission. In his evidence before the Commission, he replied to the query, "If there is no adult franchise?" And he continued, "then we would ask for separate electorate" (Ambedkar 1982: 468). Ambedkar thought that unless the Dalits receive special preference, they will be condemned by castiest society to perpetual condemnation. He believed that separate electorate might be an able resolution to overcome social discords and disorder in establishing concord and social harmony. In this connection, Iyer rightly observed, "Indian history, from the days of the sages down to now" witnessed the "environmental disabilities" that blocked the Dalit potencies. "Once they are removed," the Dalits "may well become the proud contributors to the rich treasury of our human resources." Therefore, he opined, "Reservation, inter alia, is one method of elimination of cultural inhibition long suffered by certain classes" (Iyer 1990: 114).

The Round Table Conferences (1930-32) were convened to resolve the communal question in British India. Ambedkar argued for the separate electorate for the Dalits. After prolonged debates in the Conferences, Ambedkar succeeded in getting the communal award that entails separate electorate for the Dalit as special minorities. Due to M.K. Gandhi's opposition and his consequent "fast unto death," Ambedkar had to give up his demand for separate electorates and

compromise for joint electorate in an agreement called the Poona Pact, 1932. In the joint electorate, people elect their choice of representatives in their own constituencies, whereas in the separate electorate, listed voters of the specific community elect the representatives of their choice from their own community. In this scheme, voters and representatives are from the same community and the voting is conducted separately. Indeed, this separate scheme was intended to avoid the involvement of vested interests of the majority in electing minority representatives and to ensure real representation of the minority. Ambedkar assumed that this scheme of separate electorate promises the right representatives committed to cause of the Dalits.

Ambedkar thought that the Dalits were a distinct community that qualitatively differs from that of the Hindus, Muslims and Indian Christians. Their problem of untouchability was unique since their exclusion is based on caste. They were exploited differently in socio-political and economic realms. Indeed, their suppression was worse than slaves. Along these lines, he tried to project the Dalits as minorities and their issues as political issues. For him, the Dalit question was "eminently political problem and must be treated as such" (Ambedkar 1982: 506). Consequently, he realised that the "problem of the Depressed classes will never be solved unless they get political power in their own hands" (Ibid: 506). Vexed with the apathetic stance of the British in the RTC on the Dalit question, Ambedkar held: "No share of this political power can evidently come, to us so long as the British Government remains as it is" (Ibid: 505). As a consequence, he thought that true



representation of the Dalits through separate electorates, either in the British Raj or in the Swaraj, can acquire political power and protect their rights.

Just Demands of the Dalits

Ambedkar felt that minority status of the Dalits based on birth is a stable phenomenon. The Dalits were disgraced and made low in the Hindu hierarchic social order. He sensed about "the situation in India as it will result from the new constitution, I find there will be certain provinces in which some communities will be in a majority, but in all the provinces the Depressed classes, whom I represent, will be in minority" (Ambedkar 1982: 513). "Although there are various minority communities in India which require political recognition," Ambedkar thought, "it has to be understood that the minorities are not on the same plane, that they differ from each other, they differ in the social standing which each minority occupies, vis-a-vis the majority community. We have, for instance, the Parsee community, which is the smallest community in India, and yet, vis-a-vis its social standing with the majority community, it is probably the highest in order of precedence" (Ibid: 529). The Dalits lived in miserable poverty and often they were vulnerable to social boycott. In other words, they were treated like subhuman species by the caste-Hindus. Ambedkar clarified: "We have been called Hindus for political purposes, but we have never been acknowledged socially by the Hindus as their brethren" (Ibid: 533). Notwithstanding the British policies, the caste-Hindus deprived the Dalits in employment and education because of their caste identities.

Ambedkar's demand for separate electorate and restricted franchise were connected issues. The franchise was strictly restricted to the established scholars, propertied and taxpayers in the Central Legislative Assembly and in the Council of States. Being poor and illiterate, the Dalits were deprived of electoral rewards and in some provinces, women too were excluded from voting. Though some of the Dalits were qualified, untouchability made them victims of electoral process. This pathetic phenomenon necessitated Ambedkar to demand for separate electorate for the Dalits. Not many Dalit representatives could have entered into the legislature though nomination process done as mercy by the caste-Hindus. He thought that it was just a conjecture since the history of caste-Hindus has never been sympathetic to cause of the Dalits. It was argued, "Instead of their leaving the untouchables to the mercy of the higher castes, the wiser policy would be to give power to the untouchables themselves who are anxious, not like others, to usurp power but only to assert their natural place in society" (Mangudkar 1976: 32). Ambedkar thought that the modern administration has power to execute and power to legislate. Therefore, it makes the representation of the Dalits necessary in the hostile, unjust and prejudiced public services (Ambedkar 1991: 425).

Initially, he proposed for nomination of the Dalits in the civil services of the country along with Muslims and non-Brahmins. He submitted to the Indian Statutory Commission that the public services are packed with the Brahmins and allied castes (Ambedkar 1982: 394). Whenever the Dalits and Muslims demand for their representation, the caste-Hindus argue that appointments



should be made through competition. Regarding the question of appointment through competition, Ambedkar explained, "Those circumstances presuppose that the educational system of the State is sufficiently democratic and is such that facilities for education are sufficiently widespread and sufficiently used to permit all classes from which good public servants are likely to be forthcoming to compete. Otherwise, even with the system of open competition large classes are sure to be left out in the cold. This basic condition is conspicuous by its absence in India, so that to invite backward classes to rely upon the results of competitive examination as a means of entry into the public services is to practise delusion upon them (Ibid: 395). Thus, he endorsed the claim for representation of the Dalits and other minorities in administration, and he argued against the "exclusive stress upon efficiency as the basis for recruitment." He maintained, "Often under the pressure of time or from convenience, a government department is now a days entrusted with wide power of rule-making" (Ibid: 396). Therefore, he argued, "It must be accepted as beyond dispute that such wide powers of rule-making affecting the welfare of large classes of people cannot be safely left into the hands of the administrators drawn from particular class which as a matter of fact is opposed to the rest of the population in its motives and interests, (which) does not sympathise with the living forces operating in them, is not charged with their wants, pains, cravings and desires and is inimical to their aspirations, simply because it comes out best by the test of education (Ibid: 396). For that reason, he was against the custom of nomination of the Dalits that was followed by the British until the

Poona Pact for three significant reasons. First, nomination of the Dalits to the legislatures is against the principle of responsible and representative character of the legislatures. He reasoned that to the responsible legislature the legislators should be elected (Ambedkar 1979: 345). Secondly, he believed that the nominated representatives of the Dalits would not be in a position to adequately represent their interests. Moreover, the nominations of untouchables in the legislatures were very much detrimental to the political education of the untouchables (Ibid: 276). Finally, he was against it because representation of the Dalits through nomination to the legislatures was grossly abused by the persons who without belonging to the Dalit categories got themselves nominated as representatives of the Dalits. This abuse was due to the fact that while the Governor was given power to nominate persons to represent the Dalits he was not required to confine his nomination to a person belonging to the Dalits (Dobbin and Christine 1970: 114). Therefore, Ambedkar firmly held that if there was any class, which deserved special political rights, it was the Dalit. The only path for the Dalits to succeed in the struggle against organised tyranny of the caste-Hindus was a share in political power. Accordingly, Ambedkar demanded separate electorate for the Dalits in the RTC. Among others, the Memorandum to the RTC pleaded that the Dalits "must be given sufficient political power to influence legislative and executive action for the purpose of securing their welfare" (Ambedkar 1982: 550). Given that the electoral provisions could involve: "(1) Right to adequate representation in the legislatures of the country, provincial and central. (2) Right to elect their own men as their representatives, (a) by adult



suffrage, and (b) by separate electorates for the first ten years and thereafter by joint electorates and reserved seats, it being understood that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accompanied by adult suffrage" (Ibid: 551). Along these lines, his claim for separate electorates referred to specific timeframe, adult suffrage, adequate and true representation. Moreover, his intension was to put an end to the vivid display of cast-Hindu monopoly. He explained: "Our aim is to realise in practice our ideal of one man one value in all walks of life, political, economic and social. It is because representative government is one means to that end that the Depressed classes attach to it as great a value and it is because of its value to us that I have urged upon you the necessity of making your declaration subject to its fulfilment" (Ibid: 599). In the same way, he rejected imperialism as well as feudalism and his democratic thought precludes the principle of one class ruling the other class. "No country was good enough to rule another and it was equally true," Ambedkar maintained "that no class was good enough to rule over another" (Keer 1971: 140). However, he was in favour of just representation of the Dalits and sharing the power with the rest in fair fashion.

Indifference towards Separate Electorate

The question of separate electorate was significantly connected with M.K. Gandhi. Ambedkar almost convinced delegates representing Muslims, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, even the British Prime Minister except the Congress delegate Gandhi. He vehemently opposed and clearly declared: "I will not bargain away their rights for

the Kingdom of the whole world. It will create a division in Hinduism which I cannot possibly look forward to with any satisfaction whatsoever. I do not mind untouchables, if they so desire, being converted to Islam or Christianity, I should tolerate that, but I cannot possibly tolerate what is in store for Hinduism if there are two divisions set forth in the villages. I would resist it with my life" (Ambedkar 1982: 663). Gandhi further undermined the other delegates as nominees of the British and asserted his argument in patriarchal terms: "The Congress claims to represent the whole nation" (Ibid: 660). To counter Gandhi's claims, Ambedkar argued, "I am a nominee or not, I fully represent the claims of my community" and he continued, "I can only say that it is one of the false claims which irresponsible people keep on making, although the persons concerned with regard to those claims have been invariably denying them" (Ibid: 661). Gandhi tried to side line the political dimension of Dalit representation and argued that "what these people need more than election to the legislatures is protection from social and religious persecution" (Ibid: 661). However, all of his reactionary trails failed to stop Ambedkar in getting separate electorates for the Dalits through the Communal Award, 1932. Gandhi's grand "fast unto death" against the Communal Award in 1932 changed the fate of the Dalits for ever in the country. Withstanding the pressures from the caste-Hindus, Ambedkar firmly declared: "I shall not deter from my pious duty, and betray the just and legitimate interests of my people even if you hang me on the nearest lamp-post in the street: (Keer 1971: 209). Ambedkar was caught in a dilemma that he had to choose between the options of giving up



separate electorates or saving the life of Gandhi from sure death. Finally, he had to compromise for a tricky scheme of primary and secondary elections that increased the number of seats for the Dalits. The caste-Hindu forces succeed conclusively in compromising Ambedkar for a different scheme of elections through the Poona Pact.

Afterwards it was observed that the communal award, as it related to the Dalits, was itself "reasonable and fair" and "the alleged separatist tendency in it was the result of sentimental apprehensions than a reality" (Rajasekharaiah 1971: 63). The act of fast was "not merely an act of a 'drastic step' but also it is clear beyond any doubt to even a casual observer that while Gandhi's leadership of the untouchables was 'sentimental' and 'assumed,' the leadership of Ambedkar was natural and real" (Ibid: 103). The veteran Marxist, Namboodiripad persuasively put forward the point that Gandhi's interest in "constructive work" for Harijans was more "an aspect of political tactics" with a view to meeting a "concrete political situation" than an aspect of conscientious struggle to fundamentally change the social structure of Hinduism. Besides, he clarified, "Gandhi's interest in Harijan cause and activities...should be considered as nothing but an effort on his part to disengage the Congress from the situation in which it had been placed following its break with the Government. It was an effort to find out points of contact with the British to pursue the negotiations on constitutional reforms started and temporarily broken at the Second Round Table Conference, and to recognise the Congress with a view to enabling it to meet this new situation" (Namboodiripad 1959: 13). To put in

plain words, the problem was one of disengaging the Congress from the mass civil disobedience movement and cultivating legitimation for this decision. Indeed, "Gandhi used the tactics of fast, and consequent release from prison, for intensive tours ostensibly for Harijan welfare work but really for informal consultations on the future of civil disobedience. On the other hand, the British were stunningly surprised that Gandhi who had championed the cause of depressed classes at the Conference should resort to such tactics, so was Ambedkar whose life work was suddenly and rudely shaken by Gandhi. But always, Gandhi shrewdly combined concern for the legitimation of his leadership, integration of the Congress party and constructive work for the untouchables. Consequently, the untouchables were the immediate and perhaps long-term losers" (Baxi 1984: 221).

Impact of the Poona Pact

Among others, the Pact reserved a good number of seats to the Dalits in provincial legislatures, relatively more in number than separate electorate. Indeed, it was a different form of joint electorate. In this format, "the Depressed classes voters in the reserved constituency would elect a panel of four candidates belonging to the Depressed classes. The four getting the highest number of votes in such primary elections would be eligible to contest in the final election, out of which one would be elected by the general electorate" (Kshirsagar 1992: 80). Though, the Pact provided the Dalits certain educational facilities and appointments in public services, Ambedkar was fully aware of the disadvantages of the Poona Pact. The pact made the Dalits' success completely



at the mercy of the caste-Hindu voters. The Pact gave them choice to elect the representatives who were docile and serve their vested interests in the best possible manner. In this regard he observed, "Poona Pact has completely disfranchised the scheduled Castes" (Ambedkar 1978: 61). Thus, the caste Hindu, including Gandhi's intentions were materialised through the Poona Pact. Owing to this fact, Ambedkar thought that the Poona Pact was "fraught with mischief. It was accepted because of the coercive fast of Mr. Gandhi and because of the assurance given at the time that the Hindus will not interfere in the election of the Scheduled castes" (Ibid: 76). At the end, the Pact failed as a false promise to the Dalit empowerment through representation.

The successful manipulation of the caste-Hindus including Gandhi involve vivid pressures on Ambedkar that can be comprehended in different ways. Ambedkar might have yielded to the discursive pressure of Gandhi's sure death; fear of massacres on the Dalits; the pressure mounted by the manufactured discourses in favour of joint electorates by the established personalities among caste-Hindus; lack of solidarity in the Dalit fraternity and the Dalit traitors' support for Gandhi; his own ideological weakness for the integration of Hindu society; and his strategic demand for more and agreeing for something positive in the interests of the Dalits. At the end, it can be assessed that he could not accept the Pact with free will and treated the contemporary politics as "the game of possible" with democratic spirit. Keeping the failure of the Pact in mind, Ambedkar submitted a memorandum to the Constituent Assembly, published as "States and

Minorities" later, contained his most significant thoughts on the liberation of the Dalits. The States and Minorities declared the following things: "(a) The system of election introduced by the Poona Pact shall be abolished. (b) In its place, the system of separate electorate shall be substituted. (c) Franchise shall, be adult franchise. (d) The system of voting shall be cumulative" (Ambedkar 1978: 31). Besides he marked that minorities should claim the weightage took out of the majority's share in proportionate to their social development index.

Defence of Minority Status

Many objections were directed towards the minority status for the Dalits. The opponents argued that this projection was harmful to the solidarity of the Dalits and Hindus and it leads to anti-nationalism. However, Ambedkar countered all the contentions baseless and reinforced his projection of the Dalits as special minorities and demanded for their just share of representation. He clarified the opponents' dilemmas on minority status of the Dalits on the grounds of religion. He argued for the minority status on the basis of social exclusion and the religious based analysis as misleading by defending that the "scheduled castes are not a minority is to misunderstand the meaning of the word "minority." And he continued, "Social discrimination constitutes the real test for determining whether a social group is or is not a minority" (Ibid: 62). Therefore, based on the criterion of social exclusion the Dalits became minorities. Along these lines, the Dalits' link with Hindu religion could not preclude them from the provision of separate electorate that based on social exclusion. His firm contention was that the demand for



separate electorate was not manifested from religious separation, but it was social separation that led to their just demand for separate electorate. He proved the worth of the demand by illustrating the case of Christians, the three prevalent groups, established their status as minorities and each group was made eligible for the separate electorates for all political purposes, though they all belong to the same religion. Therefore, he justified minority status of the Dalits based on social exclusion like that of the Christians groups in India. Another objection mounted by the caste-Hindus on the separate electorates for the Dalits was that it would harm solidarity between the Dalits and caste-Hindus. Ambedkar exposed their false presumption by providing reasons for them that if “there were joint electorates, it is difficult to understand how social solidarity between the Hindus and the untouchables can be promoted by their devoting one day for voting together when out of the rest of the five years they are leading severely separate lives? Similarly, assuming that there were separate electorates, it is difficult to understand how one day devoted to separate voting in the course of five years can make for greater separation than what already exists? Or, contrary wise, how can one day in five years devoted to separate voting prevent those who wish to work for their union from carrying out their purpose? To make it concrete, how can separate electorate for the untouchables prevent inter-marriage or interdining being introduced between them and the Hindus” (Ibid: 63)? Accordingly, he argued that it was pointless to assume that separate electorate would keep up separation between the caste-Hindus and the Dalits. Afterwards, he assured the caste-Hindu

opponents’ anxiety that the separate electorate shows the way to anti-nationalism by maintaining that “nationalism and anti-nationalism have nothing to do with the electoral system. They are the result of extra-electoral forces” (Ibid: 64). However, Ambedkar firmly believed that separate electorate “is nothing but a mechanism to enable a minority to return its true representatives to the legislature” (Ibid: 64). Though he believed in separate electorate for the Dalit, Ambedkar could not raise this question in the Constituent Assembly. In the initial meetings of the Assembly, Ambedkar worked out a give and take formula so that the minorities will not press for Separate Electorates and the majority will not oppose reserved seats for the minorities (Ambedkar 1990: 532). His silence on this issue, probably due to the dominance of Congress Party that was indifferent to the issue; and possibly due to unanimous acceptance of universal adult franchise in the Assembly. At last, he succeeded in securing just rights of the Dalits including their adequate representation in the legislature. Nevertheless, his concern for the adequate and effective representation of the Dalits can be viewed as an efficient agency in safeguarding the Dalit rights in particular and the rights of all citizens of India in general.

Conclusion

Ambedkar tried hard to secure safeguards for the Dalits from the British in colonial India since his involvement in the Dalit liberation movement. Among other minor achievements, the major aim of his insistence on separate electorate was to enable the Dalits to ventilate their grievances and obtain redress. Evidently, the Poona Pact prevented this process



from happening. The reservation policy based on the Poona Pact, 1932, was subsequently promulgated in the Government of India Act, 1935. The Act reserved seats for the Dalits in the central and state legislatures and later on incorporated into the Constitution of India. Thus, he extended the reservation policy at all India level. Ambedkar's thoughts on reservations for the Dalits have 'integrative value' within them as these were aimed at facilitating the inclusion of the Dalits with general social structure. Undeniably, his thoughts on reservations yielded positive results in liberating the Dalits to a certain extent in colonial era. Indeed, reservations in legislations increased the representation of the Dalits and provided them space to influence the policy making process. Without his vision of reservations, the phenomenal representation of the Dalits in legislations would not have happen. However, the Dalit representation has never been proportionate to their population.

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