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## Electoral System In India And Thoughts Of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar

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### **Abstract:**

*Countries have evolved electoral system, given to the nature of its social composition. India deployed the method with reserved seats for Dalits and Tribes in the parliaments, Assemblies and added women and backward classes in local bodies. The prime requirements of the electoral system are the delimitation of constituency boundaries, qualification of voters and candidates and methods of voting. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the single most authoritative representative to voice on the electoral system during the formative years of the Constitution of India. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar an ardent believer in democracy and belonged to the realistic school of political scientists knew actual problem of democracy and held great esteem for his land and people. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar aspired democracy means no slavery, no caste, no force and wanted free thought, choice and capacity to live, which according to people's conscience would be the right path to democracy. This paper tries to fulfill objectives, to study Indian electoral system for its uniqueness in the context of historical conditions, the nature of the government and to understand Dr. Ambedkars political leadership of Dalits to analyze the electoral method as emancipatory tools for depressed classes within a larger democratic framework.*

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**Key Words:** - *Electoral system, Representation, Depressed classes, Minorities etc.*

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### **Introduction:**

Nations and democracies have devised several electoral methods to decide a winner. The electoral methods were changed based on the nature and composition of the society and polity. Separate electorate system was in vogue during the colonial period and worked for decade and a half pursuing the idea of electoral system of India. It was in the seventies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea of a

united India was present to the minds of Indians. This was replaced by emphasis on communal characteristics and communal glories. The demand for communal representation and separate electorates on the part of the Muslims was the step towards exclusive communal progress. The British government on its side found a natural and welcomed their demands for special representation both in the Legislatures and the Services. The

political importance of the Muslims also assumed the rank of a war cry. Hindus all over India resented this. The root of the claim about the political importance of the Muslims was that they had been the rulers of India for centuries. On the other hand Hindus began to lay emphasis on the glories of ancient India and also on the outrages committed on Hindus by Muslim rulers. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wanted to transform the depressed classes into a political army to press their political claims. The movement launched by him gradually gained momentum and success. Therefore under his leadership Depressed Classes could secure special representation.

### **Representation: A Historical Perspective**

The Policy of gradual opening up of legislative bodies to Indians brought forth the issue of integrating Indian society ridden with caste hierarchy and religious minority. Muslims through the Act of 1909 and Act of 1919 secured Separate electorates. The Morley-Minto Reform Act of 1909 was the beginning of communal representation with separate electorates Under which the Muslim members were to be elected only by Muslim voters. It also provided for the separate representation of presidency corporations, chambers of commerce, universities and zamindars. Further through 1916 Lucknow Indian National Congress agreed for reserved seats with separate electorates for Muslims. This Lucknow Pact was an agreement of electoral sharing of seats in

the name of Hindu-Muslim Unity. The British Government accepted the 1916 agreement and made it part of Indian Act of 1919.<sup>i</sup> This was first step in the electoral representation by giving space to the Muslims but also to the Indian Christians, AngloIndians, Sikhs and Depressed Classes under the 1919 reforms.

### **Dr. Ambedkar on Electoral system before Poona Pact :**

In 1919, Dr. Ambedkar made his first political beginning by appearing before the Southborough Commission. His evidence before the Southborough Commission strongly advocated separate electorates with reserved seats in the legislature for the Depressed Classes in proportion to their population.<sup>ii</sup> Dr. Ambedkar mainly focused on Proportionate and adequate representation for Untouchables. He put forth the reason for low number of voters among the untouchables was due to limitations on franchise as tax payers, owning property or education. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar demanded to introduce the criteria of adult franchise to increase the number of voters among the untouchables. The issue of complete adult suffrage for the untouchables was raised throughout the negotiations in the round Table Conferences and demanded it during the negotiations with Gandhi in London. Dr. Ambedkar was aware that besides communal electorates there was other scheme for the representation of the untouchables was the right of self-determination. It was a very significant

political weapon. He was ready to lose separate electorates for joint electorates with reserved seats but not the right of self-determination through the process of referendum.<sup>iii</sup> The Government of India Act of 1919 recognized for the first time in Indian history the existence of the Depressed Classes and representatives of the Depressed Classes were nominated by the Governor General to the central Legislative assembly and in the provincial Legislatures.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the memorandum submitted on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1928 to the Simon Commission, demanded safe guards for the protection of the interests of the Depressed Classes as Minority.<sup>iv</sup> First memorandum was in regard to state of education of the Depressed Classes. He also complained that the Act of 1919 made grave injustice to the Depressed Classes who constitutes one-fifth of the population of British India<sup>v</sup> He opposed the principle of nomination and insisted on the principle of election. Regarding the system of election he opposed communal electorates and demanded sufficient seats in the general constituencies for the depressed classes. He wanted Depressed Classes should be treated as a distinct and independent minority and the Depressed Classes as minority need far greater political protection than any other minority in British India, for the simple reason that they were educationally very backward, economically poor and socially enslaved. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar claimed the political protection in the sense reserved seats for the Depressed Classes accompanied by

adult franchise. He added that if there was no adult franchise Depressed Classes should have separate electorates.

The Nehru Report provided no special provision for the representation of the Depressed Classes. The Congress Party held very cold attitude towards the problems of Depressed Classes. He looked not from the limited perspective of how it affected the untouchables but from the broader perspective of national interests. Dr. Ambedkar thought that Hindus and Muslims were not just two communities, they were two nations. On the failure of the Simon Commission and Nehru Report the British Government convened Round table conferences in London of the Indian representatives to frame a constitution for India.

#### **Round Table Conferences:**

For the Depressed Classes it was at this critical juncture necessary to assert themselves and make it clear to power what safeguard and guarantees the future constitution of India contain for the protection for their civic right. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Rao Bahadur Srinivasan were nominated as a delegate on behalf of the Depressed Classes to the Round Table Conference in London. Indian National Congress Boycotted Round Table Conference. With the fast changing political scenario in India during the Roundtable conferences Dr. Ambedkar sought right to adequate representation in the legislature of the Centre and province and right to elect their own men as their representatives, by adult suffrage and by

separate electorates for the first ten years and thereafter by joint electorates and reserved seats. The joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed Classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accompanied by adult suffrage.<sup>vi</sup> The scheme submitted to the Round Table Conference was an evolution from his earlier representation before the Southborough Committee in 1919 and the Simon Commission in 1928.

Dr. Ambedkar combined three basic issues of representation firstly the adult suffrage to be provided to the untouchables irrespective of the conditions of property etc. This would enable large untouchable voters to participate in the process of electing their own representatives. This remained a continuous issue which was raised during the Poona Pact negotiation and thereafter it was Dr. Ambedkar's credit that he pushed the complete voting rights to all adults in independent India despite severe opposition. Secondly, the limited time frame of Ten years for Separate Electorates. He thought that it would help in producing the real and true representatives of the Dalits. Thirdly, the question of Self-determination of the untouchables and for choosing the methods of political representation that joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Dalits against their will and should be accompanied by adult suffrage.

During the Second Round Table Conference Mahatma Gandhi took difficult position Dr. Ambedkar with RaoBahadurShrinivasn submitted a

supplementary memorandum on the claim of the depressed classes.<sup>vii</sup> Dr. Ambedkar defined Self-determination in clear-cut term as a form of referendum that the Dalits should avail while replacing separate electorates with joint electorates. The supplementary Memorandum included that Separate electorate for the Dalits would be replaced by a system of Joint Electorate if these two conditions are fulfilled, firstly, the majority of the representatives demands referendum in the legislature on behalf of the voters and secondly, no such referendum shall be restored to until after twenty years and the universal adult suffrage is established.

#### **Ambedkar–Gandhi Confrontation and Poona Pact:**

Dr. Ambedkar-Gandhi confrontation was nothing but a declaration of war by Gandhi and Congress against untouchables. To him the separate electorate for the depressed classes was an attempt to divide and detach the depressed classes from the main body of Hindus. He said he will support special representation for the Mulims and Sikhs as a necessary evil. It would be positive danger to Untouchables.<sup>viii</sup> Mahatma Gandhi planned to bypass the untouchables and to close the communal problem by settling within three parties, the Hindus, The Muslims and the Sikhs. Dr. Abmedkar insisted that Dalits should be considered as minority and as a separate group given their unique status as untouchables. For Ambedkar, the Dalit representation was a big leap from

thousands of years of oppression and slavery. Mahatma Gandhi while opposing to the political representation of Dalits said that, “I can understand the claim advanced by other minorities, but the claims advanced on behalf of the untouchables are bar-sinister. I will not sell the vital interest of the untouchables even for the sake of winning the freedom for of India.”<sup>ix</sup>

Dr. B.R Ambedkar in the conference drew up a document with the title ‘A Scheme of Political Safeguards for the Protection of Depressed Classes in the Future Constitution of India’.<sup>x</sup> He also formulated equal Citizenship, Adequate representation in the Legislature, adult suffrage, separate electorates etc. In the second Round Table Conference there was open clash between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar over the issue of Untouchables leadership and representation of the Untouchables in the legislatures. Both Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and RaoBahadurShrinivasan advocated ardently the necessity of separate electorates for the rapid and genuine progress of the Depressed Classes. In August 1932, the British Prime Minister McDonald announced the Communal Award for Minorities and Dalits, which granted the Depressed Classes were Separate Electorate seats with right of double vote under which they were to elect their own representatives and to vote also in the general constitutions.<sup>xi</sup>

The Round Table Conferences stirred the political and communal tension in India and Communal Award of 1932 created a great controversy over the grant

of the separate electorates to the Depressed Classes. Mahatma Gandhi opposed the announcement of Communal Award by the British Prime Minister Ramasay MacDonald. Gandhiji’s correspondence with the Prime Minister, both before and after the announcement of the award but it did not help. Hence he commenced his fast unto death on September at Poona 20, 1932. After the five days of his fast Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the caste Hindu leaders made agreement known as Poona Pact to save life of Mahatma Gandhi on September 24, 1932.

In the forced circumstances Dr. B. R. Ambedkar concluded Poona Pact with Mahatma Gandhi. This Pact replaced the right of separate electorates and the double vote by joint electorates and system of single vote. But on the other hand reserved seats were increased up to 148 instead of 71. This Poona pact arrived at two stage election processes. First, separate primary elections to be held for reserved seats out of which a panel of first four candidates would face the secondary election.

#### **Dr. Ambedkars position after the Poona Pact:**

After signing of Poona pact within four months Dr. Ambedkar proposed a change in the electoral system seeking to abolish the two stage elections which he found was time consuming and costly.<sup>xii</sup> He suggested two stages elections to be converted into a one tome elections and Scheduled castes would poll in two separate ballot boxes and winning candidate from among the scheduled

castes should receive 25% votes of the Scheduled castes to be eligible to be declared elected. Mahatma Gandhi rejected this proposal of 25% vote's criteria for eligibility to be elected. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar concluded that, "The Congress sucked the juice out of the Poona Pact and threw rind in the face of the Untouchables."<sup>xiii</sup> After the Poona Pact the Government of India appointed Hammond Committee accepted the cumulative system of voting for the election of the Depressed Classes as propounded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and rejected the system of the compulsory distributive vote suggested by the Hindus. The 1935 franchise Committee included women, but they constituted only a sixth of the electorate. The property qualification excluded the bulk of the peasants and all the working class in both town arid countries.<sup>xiv</sup>

Hence the elections of 1937 and 1946 used Poona Pact method of two stage election with a panel of four candidates. The two stage election had its drawbacks because these elections were limited by the lack of universal adult franchise and electoral roll was limited to the tax payer and land holders. Dr. B.R Ambedkar published analysis of 1937 elections in 1945 under the title, what congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wrote a treatise on the electorate system during that period in his magnum opus on what congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables. No other political leader, thinker importance and depth of understanding of the electoral

systems than Dr. Ambedkar. For Dr. Ambedkar any electoral system for the Dalits, must serve three purposes. First, it must enable the Dalits to send their true representatives to the legislature. Second, Dalits must not be completely isolated politically from the majority. Third it must enable the Dalits to influence the election of the members of the majority community to the legislature. Isolation, according to Dr. Ambedkar was the worst thing that would happen to them, since no matter how large a representation was given to Dalits, it was to remain a Minority.

#### **Dr. Ambedkar and Minority Committee:**

Dr. Ambedkar during the discussion on the sub-committee on Minorities of the constituent Assembly in 1947, as a lonely worrier, he fought and sought the separate electorate which he could not secure till the end. After the Partition the worse situation was created that the provision of reserved seats of all minorities including Scheduled castes proposed in the Constitution and adopted by the Constituent Assembly was put at peril. Sardar Patel played a crucial role in reversing Ambedkars idea of ensuring qualifying votes for winning reserved seats by the Dalit candidates. Dr. Ambedkar while illustrating the role of Sardar Patel said," You must bear in mind that you have reservation for a period of ten years only. I wanted reservation to continue till untouchability is completely abolished."<sup>xv</sup>

Prior to the independence Dr. Ambedkar put forward his demand for



separate electorate method before the British. At every level and before every British Mission which came to India on the question of future constitution. And later he engaged with the Indian political leaders after the assassination of Gandhi, Sardar Patel was deciding affairs of fate of Dalits. At the instance of Sardar Patel the resolution proposing a minimum of 35 % votes of his own communities secured Scheduled Castes candidates to be declared as elected.<sup>xvi</sup>

Before Independence in 1947, India deployed the FPTP system with several variants of electoral methods. Under this method the most important was the reserved seats with Separate Electorate for religious Minorities. It was designed to give representation to the specific Communities namely, Muslims, Indian Christians, Europeans and Anglo Indians. The voters of each of these communities in a given area are grouped into one electorate and separate from the rest. They elect representative of their community exclusively by their own votes. The feature of the Separate electorate was that the only voters of a community can vote and stand for election.<sup>xvii</sup> India after gaining independence adopted plurality system for the election of representatives to the state legislature and the Parliament. Indian government was modeled after the British parliamentary system. With universal adult franchise, Nehru hoped to overcome India's "caste-ridden" society and promote greater gender equality. In the constituent Assembly on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1949 Saradar Patel moved the report abolishing reserved seats

for Muslims and continuing reserved seats for Scheduled Castes for ten years after which the position was to be reconsidered as provided in the Poona Pact.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Dr. Ambedkar's electoral ideas were inevitable in a caste ridden unequal society of India. The first of the electoral methods demanded by the Dr. Ambedkar was separate electorates. He believed that representative elected solely through particular community would speak up for the community and struggle for quicker emancipation. Dr. Ambedkar constantly troubled the British asking for the universal right to vote and political justice most depressed humanity. After Independence the first election to the parliament was a revolution of sort that every Indian irrespective of gender, caste, religion, income or holder of land held the political weapon in the form of vote for the first. India could achieve the greatest moment because of Dr. Ambedkar who fought for the 'one man, one vote as a right'. He singularly rose to prominence by questioning the attitude of the Congress towards the removal of untouchably, the attitude of high castes to representation of Dalits and attitude of British Government towards the Dalits. Gandhi and Patel were crucial decision makers during the evolution of Indian electoral system, but ignored the electoral idea of Dr. Ambedkar. Even today the representatives group in India such as women, manual workers, religious minorities and specially, Dalits and Tribes have always remained

under-represented or represented inappropriately. Therefore, it is time to put Dr. Ambedkar's ideas into practice for a

better representative and inclusive democracy.

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