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The Problem of Political Suppression*

The introduction of the principle of political liberty in India has been very tardy & gradual. It began in the year 1892 when the principle of popular representation in the Constitution of the Legislatures was introduced. It was expanded in 1909. There were two defects in the popular representation as it stood in 1909. The first defect was the franchise was very high. It was so high that a large mass of people were excluded. Those to whom it reached were the aristocracy of the Hindus and the Muslims. The second defect was that the scheme of popular representation was confined to the Legislature. It did not extend to the Executive. The Executive continued to be independent. The Legislature could neither make or unmake the Executive. The next was taken in 1919. Curiously enough, in the scheme of 1919 the principle of popular representation was applied to the Executive without applying it in commensurate degree to the Legislature. This happened because the political movement in India was led largely by the higher classes. They have always been more anxious for Executive power than for extension of franchise. It is natural. For they stood to gain by executive power. While those who would gain by franchise were the masses.

The higher classes having the ear of the British authorities pressed for executive power and succeeded getting it without the extension of franchise.

The franchise was no doubt extended much beyond the bounds fixed in 1909. But it did not touch the Untouchables. Indeed they are so poor that nothing except adult franchise would bring the Untouchables on the electoral roll.

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* This is a six page handwritten manuscript of Dr. Ambedkar numbered as Chapter XIII of the scheme 'Hindu Social Order.' From the last sentence, the chapter seems to have been left incomplete—ed.

The Government of India was very much perturbed. They could do very little. But they did express their anxiety about placing the Untouchables under the political domination of the high caste Hindus without giving the Untouchables the right to vote in the election. In their despatch of 19th March 1919 the Government of India observed—

[Quote]

The situation was altered in 1935 under the scheme proposed by the British Government under what is called the Communal Award.

(i) The Untouchables were to have a differential franchise so as to enfranchise about ten per cent of their population.

(ii) The Untouchables were not only to have a differential franchise, they were to have certain number of seats reserved for them in the Provincial and Central Legislatures.

(iii) The seats reserved for them were to be filled by separate Electorates formed exclusively of voters belonging to the Untouchable Community.

(iv) In addition to having a vote in the Separate Electorates the Untouchables were to have a second or additional vote in the general election for seats open to Hindus other than the Untouchables.

Mr. Gandhi who had been objecting to separate representation of the Untouchables raised a protest against the proposal of the British Government and threatened to fast unto death if these concessions were not withdrawn. Mr. Gandhi's objection was mainly to Separate Electorates and as the British Government refused to withdraw their proposals unless there was an agreement between the Untouchables and the Hindus. Thereupon Mr. Gandhi started his fast. Eventually an agreement was arrived at between the Hindus and the Untouchables in September 1932. That agreement is known as the Poona Pact. Its terms are reproduced below :

POONA PACT *

(1) There shall be seats reserved for the Depressed Classes out of the general electorate seats in the Provincial Legislatures as follows :

Madras 30 : Bombay with Sind 15 ; Punjab 8 ; Bihar and Orissa 18 ; Central Provinces 20 ; Assam 7 ; United Provinces 20 ; Total 148.

These figures are based on the total strength of the Provincial Councils, announced in the Prime Minister's decision.

(2) Election to these seats shall be by joint electorates subject, however, to the following procedure:

All the members of the Depressed Classes registered in the feneral electoral roll in a constituency will form an electoral college, which will elect a panel of four candidates belonging to the Depressed Classes for each of such reserved seats, by the method of the single vote ; the four persons getting the highest number of votes in such primary election, shall be candidates for election by the general electorate.

(3) Representation of the Depressed Classes in the Central Legislature shall likewise be on the principal of joint electorates and reserved seats by the method of primary election in the manner provided for in Clause two above, for their representation in the Provincial Legislatures,

(4) In the Central Legislatures, eighteen per cent of the seats allotted to the general electorate for British India in the said legislature shall be reserved for the Depressed Classes.

(5) The system of primary election to a panel of candidates for election to the Central and Provincial Legislatures, as hereinbefore mentioned, shall come to an end after the first ten years, unless terminated sooner by mutual agreement under the provision of Clause six below.

(6) The system of representation of the Depressed Classes by reserved seats in the Provincial and Central Legislature as provided for in Clauses 1 and 4 shall continue untill determined by mutual agreement between the communities concerned in the settlement.

(7) Franchise for the Central and Provincial Legislatures for the Depressed Classes shall be as indicated in the Lothian Committee Report.

(8) There shall be no disabilities attaching to any one on the ground of his being a member of the Depressed Classes in regard to any elections to local bodies or appointment to the Public Services. Every endeavour shall be made to secure fair representation of the Depressed Classes in these respects, subject to such educational qualifications as may be laid down for appointment to the Public Services.

* Signed on 25th September 1932.

(9) In every province out of the educational grant, an adequate sum shall be earmarked for providing educational facilities to the members of the Depressed Classes.

This pact forms the charter of the political liberty of the Untouchables. The first election . . . . . .

(Left incomplete—ed.)

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