

DEPRESSED CLASSES AGAINST SECOND CHAMBERS

Dr. Ambedkar on Joint Parliamentary Committee Report Provision for Better Representation Demanded

“While it is a matter of great satisfaction to me and to the Depressed Classes that the Poona Pact has not been disturbed by the Joint Parliamentary Committee. I must point out that the Depressed Classes have been unjustly treated by the changes introduced by the J. P. C. in the matter of representation in the Provincial Second Chambers and in the Upper Chamber of the Federal Assembly”. Thus writes Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in a statement of his views on the Joint Select Committee’s report in so far as it relates to the Depressed Classes.

Dr. Ambedkar continues :—

The Depressed Classes opposed the establishment of the Second Chambers in the Provinces. They were deemed unnecessary under the Montague-Chelmsford reforms. They were not recommended by the Simon Commission. They are condemned by all the political organisations of India. In the opinion of the Depressed Classes they constitute a retrograde step and will prove a hindrance to the progress of the country.

The Composition

The second ground of the opposition of the Depressed Classes to the Second Chambers arises from the Composition of these Second Chambers. It is obvious that in some of the Provinces in which Second Chambers are instituted, is there any seat reserved for the Depressed Classes? Special provision is made for the representation of Muslims, Europeans and Indian Christians in these Provincial Second Chambers. But in no Province is any such provision made for the Depressed Classes. The Depressed Classes of Bombay, Madras, and the United Provinces are left to get such representation as they can out of the general seats in a straight election fight with High Caste Hindu candidates.

If there was any chance of the Depressed Classes winning seats in an open fight against Caste Hindu candidates there would have been no necessity for the Poona Pact. It is therefore obvious that there will be no representatives of the Depressed Classes in the Second Chambers in these Provinces. In Bengal and Bihar it is provided that 27 out of 65 in the former and 12 out of 30 in the latter will be elected, by the method of the single transferable vote, by members of the Provincial Lower House.

Insufficient Seats

This opens up a possibility for the Depressed Classes in these two Provinces to secure representation in the Second Chambers. On a closer study of the facts it will, however, be clear that in Bihar there will be no probability because the depressed classes seats in the Provincial Lower House (15 in 152) will not be sufficient to give them the necessary quota, and in Bengal 30 in a house of 250 will hardly give them a quota for one seat.

Not only will there be no seat for the Depressed Classes in any of the Provincial Second Chambers, but on account of the franchise, they will not be able even to influence the elections to the Second Chambers.

Need of Reserved Seats

The J. P. C. seems to have given no thought to these adverse effects, its proposals were calculated to produce on the representation of the Depressed Classes in the Second Chambers. In connection with its franchise proposals the committee observes that "the qualifications above indicated will also apply to candidates, but special provision may be necessary in the case of women and the Depressed Classes." That special provision will be necessary is beyond doubt. But what I wish to point out is that a differential qualification in favour of the Depressed Classes' candidate will be of no avail if the franchise of the voters remains uniform. Indeed, differential qualification in favour of Depressed Classes' voters will not help them to win in elections unless seats are reserved for them.

The Position of the Depressed Classes in regard to their representation in the Federal Upper House has also undergone a complete change for the worse. Under the White Paper proposals the

electorates for the Federal Upper House was the Provincial Lower House and the elections were to be by the proportional system and the method of the single transferable vote. As in the Provincial Lower Chambers, the Depressed Classes were represented in sufficiently large numbers to give them the necessary quota to get one member of their own class elected at any rate in eight or nine Provinces, the Depressed Classes were sure of eight or nine seats in the Federal Upper House. This prospect has now been completely destroyed by the change in the system of election to the Federal Upper House proposed by the J.P.C.

Electoral Colleges

As I have pointed out, there will be no representatives of the Depressed Classes in the Provincial Second Chambers, which are to serve as electorates to the Federal Upper House in those Provinces where the legislatures are bicameral. Turning to the proposed electoral colleges in the Provinces, which will be unicameral, and examining their composition, it will be seen that there are no provisions for special electoral colleges for the Depressed Classes as there are for Sikhs and Muslims. Nor is any special provision similar to that made for Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans.

In regard to the constitution of special electoral colleges in unicameral Provinces the committee observes "The question of special provisions for the Depressed Classes among the General Seats requires special consideration especially in relation to the Central Provinces.

If special provision is necessary for the Depressed Classes of the Central Provinces why is special provision not necessary for the Depressed Classes in other unicameral Provinces? And if special provision is necessary for Depressed Classes in the Unicameral Provinces why is not special provision necessary in bicameral provinces? The condition of the Depressed Classes is the same all over the country and it cannot be said that the position of the Depressed Classes in the Central Provinces is worse than that of their fellows in other parts of the country.

Against Vital Interests

In omitting thus to provide for their representation has J.P.C. acted against the vital interests of the Depressed Classes ? I would like to remind His Majesty's Government that the consent of the Depressed Classes to the transfer of power to Indians was conditional upon adequate provision being made for their representation in the legislatures of the country under the new constitution. I had made this abundantly clear in my speech as the representative of the Depressed Classes at the Plenary Session of the First Round Table Conference. This omission to provide for the representation of the Depressed Classes in the Second Chambers, Provincial and Federal, is also contrary to the considered views of all those who have dealt with the problem.

I am sure that the sentiments of the Prime Minister on which the Depressed Classes have been relying were intended to be earned out in the framing of the new constitution, but the J. P. C. failed to respect these sentiments, with the result that the interests of the Depressed Classes in the matter of representation in the Second Chambers, Federal and Provincial, have been flagrantly neglected. I must, therefore, say that it would not be possible for the Depressed Classes to give their support to the scheme of reforms, and I hope that His Majesty's Government will modify the proposals of the J.P.C. so as to safeguard the interests of the Depressed Classes in the matter of representation in the Second Chambers, Federal and Provincial. I am sorry to say that it would not be possible for the Depressed Classes to give their support to the scheme of reform if these proposals stand as they are.”¹

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¹: The Times of India, dated 15th January 1935.