

CONGRESS ATTEMPTS TO BYPASS UNTOUCHABLES

One of the most important days in the history of Indian politics was the 12th November 1930, the day on which late Majesty King George the 5th, formally inaugurated the Indian Round Table Conference. From the view point of the Indians it was an important incident; for the first time it recognised the right of Indians to be consulted in framing the constitution of their country. For the Untouchables it was a landmark in their history. They too were for the first time recognised to be represented separately by two delegates, the late Mr. Shrinivasan and my humble self. The Indian National Congress was the only body which did not take part in this Conference. The work of the Conference was distributed in nine committees, one of them being the Minorities Committee.

The Act of 1919 which emphasised necessity of protection of the Depressed Classes, actually did nothing. It was just a theoretical assertion. I, therefore, submitted a memorandum in which I pleaded for the following :-

- (1) Equal citizenship for the Depressed Classes,
- (2) Free enjoyment of equal right,
- (3) Protection against Discrimination,
- (4) Sufficient political power for the Depressed Classes to influence the legislative and executive action for the purpose of securing their welfare, which included-
 - (a) right to adequate representation in the Legislature, and
 - (b) right to elect their own men,
 - (i) by adult suffrage, and by
 - (ii) separate electorate for the first ten years, and there after by joint electorates with reserved seats,
- (5) Adequate representation in the services. It was emphasized to establish a Public Service Commission in all the provinces whose duties would be :
 - (a) to recruit the services in such a manner as to secure due and adequate representation of all the communities, and

(b) to regulate from time to time priority in employment in accordance with the existing extent of the representation of the various communities in any particular service concerned,

(6) Redressing against prejudicial action or neglect of interest,

(7) Special Departmental care, and

(8) Fair representation according to their population in the Cabinet.

Now let us ask what happened to these demands of the Untouchables ? We must turn to the report made by the Minorities Committee to the Round Table Conference. Items 16 and 18 tell us the determined attitude of the Depressed Classes in securing separate electorate for themselves. In brief, it was unanimously agreed that the Untouchables were entitled to be recognised as a separate element in the political life of India. Here we must not forget that the unanimous agreement on the point of the separate recognition of the Untouchables was made possible only in the absence of the Indian National Congress.

To turn to the Second Round Table Conference we find that the Congress had its full representation in it. Every one was looking forward to the Congress to lead the Conference to success. Unfortunately, Mr. Gandhi was chosen to represent the Indian National Congress. A worse person could not have been found to guide the destiny of India. He presented a curious picture of a man, who in many cases would terrify the Conference to resist in every way any compromise which he regarded below his principle, though others would regard it absolutely as a prejudice and in other cases he would remain silent on the points of vital importance which was considered as a matter of principles by others. On 15th September 1931, Mr. Gandhi made his first speech in which he said that the problem of the Untouchables is not at all. He referred to the activities of the Social Conference, about which we know that the Congress did not allow this body to hold its annual session under the pandal of the Congress, merely because Mr. Tilak

had threatened to burn the pandal if it was allowed to be used by the Social Conference party. On 17th September 1931 in the Federal Structure Committee Mr. Gandhi fulminated the following words :

“Of course, the Congress will share the honour with Dr. Ambedkar of representing the interests of the Untouchables. They are as dear to the Congress as the interests of any other body or of any other individual throughout the length and breadth of India. Therefore, I could most strongly resist any further special representation.”

Indeed, this was nothing but the declaration of war by Mr. Gandhi and the Congress against the Untouchables. He was making his plans to bypass the Untouchables and to close the problem by bringing about a settlement between the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs. It was being done quite confidentially. Knowing that this was a mischievous move I got up and said, “I should like to say that I have already presented our case to the Minorities Sub-Committee last time. But I do want to say most emphatically that whoever claims it, he cannot give it out of my share. I want to make that absolutely plain.” On this point Mr. Gandhi remained silent and went on contemplating about the pact between the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs. Mr. Gandhi failed to achieve success in this pact. He cut a sorry figure when he said that the failure in achieving the success was owing to the fact that the representation of the delegates was defective as all the delegates were nominated by the Government. This was an indirect challenge to the authenticity of the representation made by me as the delegates of the Untouchables, Mr. Gandhi insisted that he was the sole champion of the Depressed Classes. To answer the challenge of Mr. Gandhi I said, “Even if the Depressed Classes of India were given a chance of electing their representatives to this Conference, I would all the same find a place here. I say, therefore, whether I am a nominee or not, I fully represent the claims of my community.” In the course of my speech I also showed them a telegram which I had then received, the telegram was sent by a man whom I had never met, it was also sent from a place where I had never gone too. Not only this, telegrams after

telegrams poured in the Conference all in my support, it was a defeat for Mr. Gandhi, who was now forced to keep quiet and accept the inglorious defeat of so glaring a claim.

Thus is the old story of the end of all the efforts of the Minorities Committee to bring about a solution of the communal problem. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the main purpose of Mr. Gandhi in going to the Round Table Conference was to oppose the legitimate demands of the Untouchables. Mr. Gandhi would not mind the separate electorate of the Muslims or the Sikhs, but when the Untouchables ventured to be recognised as a separate entity, he made the bitterest condemnation of their demands. Mr. Gandhi had no logic, he had no principles. He had only the 'agony of his soul' which morally forced him to utter out those pious sentences against the Untouchables. He never dared to oppose the Muslims in the same sarcastic language. How could he? He dared to oppose the demands of the Untouchables only because he anticipated that those Untouchables who were unpaid slaves of the Caste Hindus were being dragged out of the bond of slavery, which in other words meant that the Caste Hindus would have to be bereft of the honorary serf who had added to their dignity for times unknown.

Although the Congress has been beating the drums of her most representative character, this incident plainly showed that the Congress was nothing but another name for the Caste Hindus. That is why we see the Congress more alert on the point of segregation of the Untouchables from the rest of the Caste Hindus. Had this objection been raised by any other body it would have been considered legitimate. But what axes had the Congress to grind when she talks on behalf of the Untouchables? Does this not mean that the Congress is apparently a Hindu body. The problem of the Untouchables was the problem of the Caste Hindus and the Congress was not a Hindu organisation, then why should she put her nose into the problem which was quite foreign to her own sphere? She only wanted to lull the Untouchables into sleep for another thousand years by not allowing the legitimate rights for the Untouchables.

The Congress centred all its energies towards the neglect of the Untouchables. They approached the Muslims and devised a Scheme to bypass the Untouchables. Mr. Gandhi agreed to the fourteen points of the Muslims on the condition that they would not support the Untouchables and would withdraw their support to them. But thanks to the noble sense of humanity in the Muslims they rejected this offer made by the Congress and thus did not agree to isolate the Untouchables. In the Franchise Committee the Congress made another attempt to by-pass the Untouchables. Strange as it may appear some of the witnesses said that there were no Untouchables at all. This shows that how the Congress can conspire in a cold and calculated manner against the Untouchables out of pure Selfishness and do indirectly what he cannot do directly.¹

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¹ : Jai Bheem : dated March 12, 1946.

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