

JOINT VS. SEPARATE ELECTORATES DR. AMBEDKARS VIA MEDIA

Minority in a Province to Decide Question

The Times of India reported Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's statement on this subject as saying that—

“The exchange of views and compliments between Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Mr. Jinnah has once more revealed that there is no hope in the immediate future of the Hindus and Muslims agreeing to replace the Communal Decision of His Majesty's Government by a settlement based on mutual agreement. Pandit Malaviya has left the field by saying that for the present the two communities must work separately, I do not know how many will look with satisfaction at the prospect of the two communities working separately. To me at any rate it appears that working in separation must inevitably end in working in antagonism.

I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, and I make this proposal not as a Partisan but as a student of the problem.

Before I set forth the proposal, I should like to promise that the expression “minority” has been loosely used in the communal controversy and what is worse is that it is used without any reference to the Province or to the constituency in a Province in relation to which alone it can have any meaning in politics. In my view a community is a minority and is entitled to get protection as a “minority” only if it is a minority in the Province, or strictly speaking if it is a “minority” in the constituency. Except in relation to the Province or to the constituency a “minority” has no political significance.

A Suggestion

Staring from this basic point, on which I should like to lay the utmost emphasis I can, my proposal is to separate the two questions that are covered in the Communal Award, namely the question of seats and the question of electorates. These two questions are

separate questions and the considerations that have to be taken into account for their solution are quite different. Having separated the two questions, my advice to Hindus and to Muslims is to accept that part of the Communal Award which deals with the number of seats if not permanently, *Pro tem*, leaving it to be decided on some more equitable principle at some future stage. But with regard to the question of electorates let the Communal Award be modified by the acceptance by Hindus and Muslims of this simple proposition, that the question of electorates is a matter for the minority in the Province or strictly for a minority in a particular constituency of the Province whether the election before the Central or Provincial Legislature and the majority should abide by the decision of the minority.

Minority Must Decide

If the minority wants separate electorates the majority should have nothing to say against it; equally if the minority wants joint electorates, the majority should be bound to accept their decision.

The proposal could be applied even in cases where there are many minorities and where they are not of a common mind on the issue of electorates. In such cases the minority which wants a separate electorate will have a separate register for itself, while the minority wishing to have a joint electorate will have a common register with the majority. Nothing could be better if the agreement accepted the principle that the decision in the matter of electorates is to rest with the minority in each constituency. But if that cannot be achieved, it would be some advance if an agreement could be arrived at on the basis that the decision as to the electorates is to be left to the minority in the Province.

By such an agreement the Muslim minorities in the Hindu majority Provinces like Bombay, Madras, the Central Provinces, the United Provinces, etc, will get separate electorates if they choose to have them. On the other hand, in the Muslim majority Provinces like the Punjab, Sind, Bengal and the N. W. F. Provinces

the Hindus will have joint electorates if they ask for them. The whole point of the proposal is to leave the question of the electorates to the decision of the minority. Separate or joint electorates are devised for the protection of the minority and the minority is the best judge as to which of these two will protect it best.

If the proposal is faulty in principle, it would, of course, deserve no consideration at the hands of either Mr. Jinnah or Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. But if the proposal is just and fair, as I believe it is, I hope Mr. Jinnah will have the courage to pass it upon his Co-religionists and Pandit Malaviya the wisdom to accept.

A Middle Stage

The proposal does not, of course, help in one sweep to realise the goal of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha to have joint electorates instituted in all the Provinces of India between Hindus and Muslims. But the proposal has the merit of establishing a middle stage between the extreme Congress and Hindu Mahasabha stand on joint electorates throughout and the extreme Muslim demand of separate electorates throughout. From this middle stage, at which there will prevail a mixed system of joint electorates in some Provinces and separate electorates in the rest, the journey to the final stage of joint electorates throughout will be rendered very easy. It is only the impatient idealists among the protagonists of joint electorates who will disapprove of the proposal.”¹

However, there were additional dimensions in the statement of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, on the subject which were reported by the ‘Janata’. The dimensions were ;

“The structure of the electorate is not an exclusive concern of the minority. It is a problem in constitution-making in which the whole nation has a stake. A national problem cannot be converted into a special preserve for the exclusive judgment of this or that part of it, by the mere assertion of some claim for protection supposed to be connected with it. Since uniformity on any question is impossible, the judgment of the majority has come to do duty as the nearest possible substitute to the will of the people, in a world of inevitable divergence in political tenets.

¹ : The Times of India, dated 9th April 1934.

To elevate the minority, only because it is a minority, to a pinnacle of power and prestige superior to that held by the majority, is the way to cut at the root of the very fundamental principle of democratic government. Political thought marches from precedent to precedent. An objectionable principle, once given quarter tends to surround itself with a sort of vested interest. With power secured from mere sufferance, it defies all attempts made to dislodge it. It is for this reason that temporary compromises, tolerated with the hope of being soon dispensed with, end by becoming formidable obstacles to progress.

No consideration can justify the setting up of a tyranny of the minority, or the relegation of the will of the majority to a status inferior to that of minority.

— Free Press”¹



¹: Reprinted : Janata, dated 28th April 1934.