

## Politicization of a Social Issue: Changing Attitude of the Depressed Class

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**Abstract:** *Caste had been the basic category of social differentiation in Colonial India. The late colonial era experienced a crucial phase of Census-based caste movements in different parts of the subcontinent. However, such new opportunities for social mobilization were primarily utilized by the traditionally privileged caste groups. Initially the caste movements were concerned with eradicating social exploitations based on caste inequality. The political scenario was dominated by the privileged caste groups. However, eventually, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political consciousness developed among the 'depressed class', who now raised their voice for attaining political rights. From the 1930s, the social problem of caste discrimination thus attained political colour. Dalits under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar asserted as a political minority. As a consequence, after independence, the Indian Constitution declared the practice of 'untouchability' to be illegal and provided all its adult citizens, irrespective of caste, class, religion, the right to vote.*

**Keywords:** *Census, Non-Brahman Movements, Jyotiba Phule, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, B. R. Ambedkar, Communal Award, All India Scheduled Caste Federation.*

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Caste had been the basic category of social differentiation in Colonial India. The caste system posited several inequalities. The new opportunities for social advancement created under the impact of the colonial regime were initially exploited by the traditionally privileged caste groups. The unequal access to resources benefited the upper caste in the initial stages of political awakening, in that they dominated the political scene to the exclusion of other non privileged caste groups. But then the impact of democratic politics was felt and the competition among the upper caste for political power began to widen the circle of political participation, and politically ineffective caste groups began to be inducted into the political process. This meant that a trend of dispersal of inequalities started. Actually, the lower castes and the 'untouchables' started non-Brahman movements and questioned the fundamentals of the prevailing social organisation from the late nineteenth century. But these movements concentrated mainly on the social discrimination of the caste system. Eventually, during the first half of the twentieth century, political consciousness developed among this 'depressed class' and they also fought for acquiring political rights. As a consequence, after independence, the Indian Constitution declared the practice of 'untouchability' to be illegal and provided all its adult citizens, irrespective of caste, class, religion and so on, the right to vote.

In our present study, we would try to analyse how the issue of caste discrimination transformed from a social problem to a political one during the first half of the twentieth century. In order to discuss this matter, we should look into some important points like- (i) impact of colonialism on caste system and also how the 'depressed class' came to be regarded as worthy of colonial concern, (ii) how the existing social organisation came to be criticised through the non-Brahman movements, (iii) indifference of the early Congress leaders to the caste issue and how did Gandhi bring about a change in this attitude, (iv) how did 'Dalit Movement' acquire a political thrust from 1930s and how was the politicization of Dalit identity crystallized during this period, etc.

### **Impact of Colonialism on Caste System:**

Scholars are of divergent opinions regarding the exact impact of colonialism on caste. Nicholas Dirks states that colonialism made caste the central symbol of Indian society.<sup>1</sup> Actually, colonial rule created conditions and set processes in motion for the growth of non-Brahman ideology and emergence of lower caste movements. This was because, on one hand, there was a direct attack on the institution of caste by Protestant missionaries and, on the other hand, classification of castes according to numbers in the censuses made visible the discrepancy between numerical strength and social privileges of various castes. Thus, Ishita Banerjee-Dube argues that the caste wise inventory drawn up by the census underscored the inconsistency between number and privilege as it made different groups aware of their numerical strength in the population. This prompted them to claim a certain degree of equality

in public employment.<sup>2</sup>

The first census of India took place over a two-year period between 1871-72. The primary principle of classification used in 1872 was that of varna.<sup>3</sup> The main aim was to collect information on caste. The writers of the individual provincial census reports tried to classify the castes in blocks. Bernard Cohn points out that in the 1881 census, the Commissioner for India, W.C.Plowden, decided that the caste tables as found in the reports should contain information on castes containing more than 100,000 people. The castes should be arranged in five categories: Brahmans, Rajputs, Castes of good social position, Inferior Castes and Non-Hindus or Aboriginal Castes.<sup>4</sup> In the 1901 census, which was done under Risley's direction, the question of caste precedence and of race came together and he felt that through anthropometric measurement he had confirmed his hypothesis that social precedence was based on a scale of racial purity. Risley's decision to grade the castes according to their position in the social hierarchy in the census of 1901, induced members of several upwardly mobile castes to come together to place for a higher placement in the hierarchy. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay maintains that voluntary caste associations emerged as a new phenomenon in Indian public life which engaged in census-based caste movements.<sup>5</sup>

Before the reservation of seats for Muslims in the provincial legislative assemblies was granted by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, rulers of certain princely states like Mysore, Kolhapur, had introduced caste-based reservation in public employment for members of the 'depressed classes', a vague category that emerged out of census.<sup>6</sup> The rulers had been prompted by the huge gap in numerical strength and access to privileges that the census brought to the fore. Understandably, Southern and Western India witnessed the growth of non-Brahman movements relatively early.

### **Non-Brahman Movements and the Attitude of Congress:**

In 1873, Jotirao Phule setup his 'Satyasodhak Samaj'. Phule believed that Brahman monopoly was solely responsible for the predicament of Sudra and Atisura castes. He had inversed the Orientalist myth of an Aryan invasion and reconstructed history as one of caste conflict and reclaimed a non-Aryan Kshatriya past for subordinate groups in Maharashtra. In his depiction, the Brahmans were the descendants of Aryan invaders who had conquered the indigenous peoples of India and forcibly imposed their religion as an instrument of social control. Phule's writings established a 'historical identity' for the untouchables by the late nineteenth century.

The Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 introduced separate electorates that had given a fillip to non-Brahman caste in their quest for self-respect. The reforms of 1909, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay argues, brought the question of lower castes from the realm of philanthropy to the arena of politics.<sup>7</sup> They began to organise themselves as "Depressed classes". This gained

momentum from 1917 onwards and various Depressed Class Association began in different parts of India. The nationalists at this time were demanding a higher degree of self-government and the British were opposing such demands by citing the necessity for protecting minorities.<sup>8</sup> By encouraging self-awareness of the lower castes, the British tried to keep the nation divided and weak. On the other hand, in its eagerness to avoid socially sensitive issues, it ignored the caste question till 1917 and then took it up only when Dalit leaders had organised themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The anti-Brahman movement found its political forum in the Justice Party that came into being in 1916. Consciously constituted as a party of non-Brahmans, the Justice Party published a Non-Brahman manifesto and opposed the Indian National Congress. The party showed its full loyalty to the colonial administration and vied for privileges offered by government-sponsored reforms. Indeed it demanded separate representation for non-Brahmans in Legislative Council.

In 1917, a Depressed Classes Conference was held in Bombay under the championship of N.G.Chandavarkar. Resolutions called for Depressed Class rights to elect their own representatives to the Legislative Councils in proportion to their numbers.<sup>10</sup> The leader of the non-Brahman party, Bapuji Namdeo Bagade, also asked for representation according to numbers for Depressed Classes. In 1918, another conference was held in Bombay under the leadership of S.G.G.Rokde. They demanded not only representation but also separate electorates in which only the Depressed Class would be permitted to vote for their representatives. In fact, the Government of India Act of 1919 formally recognised the “special needs” of the “depressed classes” by including a representative from these classes among the fourteen nominated non-official members in the Central Legislative Assembly.<sup>11</sup>

The Reforms of 1919 granted 28 reserved seats to non-Brahmans in the Madras Legislative Council, and the Justice Party participated in the elections in 1920 in total violation of the Congress programme of non-cooperation. The high point in the achievements of the Justice Party was the formation of a ministry in 1920. But the Justice Party was almost completely ousted by the Swaraj Party in the 1926 elections.

With the rise of Gandhi to Congress power in 1919, social reform became a legitimate cause for Congress concern. Gandhi's leadership introduced a major change in the approach towards Untouchability. E.Zelliot argues that Gandhi treated the issue of untouchability more as a religious issue than a social one.<sup>12</sup> In 1920, untouchability came to be defined in a particular sense as a ‘reproach to Hinduism.’ Religious leaders were requested to help in reforming Hinduism so that it could be purged of this egregious accretion. Dilip Menon argues that a nationalist unity could be imagined only if the difference and inequality between castes could be tackled. If Hinduism could be purified by the abolition of untouchability and everyone could enter it as equals, then it would be possible to unify the diverse caste movements under the umbrella of the Congress.<sup>13</sup>

Gail Omvedt states that in the 1920s, ‘Dalits’ began to organise strongly and independently

throughout many regions of India. The most important of these movements were the AD-Dharm movement in Punjab, the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra, the Namasudra movement in Bengal, the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu, etc.<sup>14</sup> Sri Narayan Guru led a movement in Kerala for the upliftment of the Ezhavas.

E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar, joined the Congress in 1919 and became a prominent figure in Tamil Congress. But soon he saw it a Brahman Tamil Congress and left it to organise the self-respect movement. Actually, Periyar entered the campaign at Vaikkam, a temple town in the princely state of Travancore. The campaign concerned the issue of temple entry for the 'untouchable' caste of Ezhavas. Temple entry became an important concern of Gandhi and of Congress as an extension of reform activities around the plight of untouchable groups. On 30 March 1924, K.P.Kesava Menon and T.K.Madhavan attempted to walk on the road near the temple, and were arrested.<sup>15</sup> Gandhi specified the Satyagraha to be a Hindu affair. Nicholas Dirks argues that by saying that Gandhi tried to include the untouchables within the Hindu fold. Rather than constituting another minority, untouchables were to help Hindus constitute the majority.<sup>16</sup> Periyar quarrelled with Congress and Gandhi very soon after the Vaikkam affair over the question of separate dining for Brahman and non-Brahman students in a Congress-sponsored school near Madras. In late 1925, Periyar left the Congress. After this break, he declared his political agenda to be "no god; no religion; no Gandhi; no Congress; and no Brahmans".

In 1926, Periyar established the "Self-Respect Movement", an organisation that set for itself a very different task from that of the Justice Party, even though its rhetoric built on that of the early non-Brahman movement. Whereas the Justice Party had been concerned about proportional representation, the Self-Respect Movement advocated the overthrow of caste and instituted new forms of marriage and other ritual practices designed to encourage intercaste associations.<sup>17</sup> Periodically, the movement organised dramatic assaults on religious symbols. Periyar used his newspaper, *Kudi Arasu*, as the mouthpiece for a series of radical critiques of Congress and Brahmanism.

Thus, the non-Brahman elite defied the supremacy of Brahmans in social and religious fields. They remained openly loyal to the British government, after their demand for special privileges was granted by the 1919 Reforms. A non-Brahman political party, the Non-Brahman Association, setup after the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms, disregarded the Congress call for non-cooperation, contested elections to provincial Legislative Councils and secured a few seats. Anupama Rao suggests that political power made the elite abandon the struggle for social reform. Phule's dream of a united front of Sudras and Ati-Sudras turned out to be ephemeral, and the non-Brahman Association slowly dissociated itself from the powerful 'untouchable' movement taking shape under B.R.Ambedkar.<sup>18</sup>

### **Attaining Political Colour: Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement:**

B.R. Ambedkar appeared on the political scene for the first time in 1919, when he was called to testify to the Southborough Committee.<sup>19</sup> Zelliott points out that the Mahar community had exhibited an early interest in political means, exemplified by the petitions and the Depressed India Association began in 1916, which G.A. Gawai, represented. Ambedkar was able to guide this political awareness into far more effective channels. His education both enabled him to speak in modern political terms and won him the respect and admiration of his caste.

Christophe Jaffrelot maintains that Ambedkar emphasised the need for a 'community electorate' for untouchables at the expense of the reserved seats formula.<sup>20</sup> In the reserved seats system, the candidate could only be an untouchable in a certain number of constituencies, but they were never in a majority in any one constituency. In any constituency coalition of high and intermediate castes could then elect an untouchable of their choice, for whom the local untouchables would not have voted. On the contrary, in the separate electorate system only untouchables could vote for untouchable candidates. This system would constitute themselves into a real political force. Ambedkar also asked for the lowering of the taxable rating level applied to untouchables to make a greater number of them eligible to vote.<sup>21</sup> In 1919, G.A. Gawai's Depressed Classes' Mission submitted to the British a rival project to Ambedkar's in which it proposed that untouchable representatives should be co-opted by the elected members of the legislative council. Ambedkar denounced it. In 1919 reform, they obtained only one representative, D.D. Gholap, in the Legislative Council of Bombay Presidency. An additional representative was later appointed in 1924, and Ambedkar joined it in this manner in 1927.<sup>22</sup>

In the meantime, in collaboration with Shahu Chatrapati, the Maharaja of Kolhapur, he formed the first forum for depressed classes which organised the first All India Conference of the Depressed Classes in Nagpur in May 1920. Gandhi's belief in 'varnashramdharma' and his reluctance to directly criticise caste had disappointed Ambedkar. In 1926, All India Depressed Classes Association was formed under the presidency of M.C. Rajah in Nagpur. Ambedkar later resigned from this association and founded his own All India Depressed Classes Congress in 1930.<sup>23</sup>

In 1928, Simon Commission provided the next opportunity after Southborough for untouchables to plead for direct representation. Ambedkar made a strong case for separate political representation of the depressed classes through elections and for adopting a different system of franchise. But the Commission decided against a separate electorate. Though, it proposed that there should be some reservation of seats for members of the depressed classes in provincial legislatures.<sup>24</sup>

Ambedkar argued that the depressed classes required special representation as they constituted a 'third community' alongside Hindus and Muslims. Ambedkar's redeployment of Dalit identity crystallised in the 1930s around his representation of Dalits as a separate

political minority.<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar believed that the untouchables remained powerless without political power.

Gail Omvedt argues that the Dalit Movement had a political thrust. The sustained and vehement attack on Dalits in the varna-jati classification of caste and its concomitant socio-ritual stigmatisation made the issue of untouchability a 'politically salient one'.<sup>26</sup> The untouchables from around the 1930s, began to call themselves 'dalit' or oppressed. The term more appropriately signified their socio-economic position in Hindu-India, than the colonial terms "depressed classes", replaced after 1936 by "Scheduled Castes", or the Gandhian term "Harijan". The term Dalit was perceived to be somewhat self-descriptive and was associated with self-respect, anger. Ambedkar saw 'Brahmanism' and 'Capitalism' as the main enemies of the Dalits.<sup>27</sup>

Ghanshyam Shah classifies these movements in two broad categories reformatory and alternative. The former advocated the reform of the caste system to solve the problem of untouchability. On the other hand, the alternative movements like the movement launched by B.R. Ambedkar attempted to create an alternative socio-cultural structure by encouraging conversion to some other religion or by laying emphasis on education, economic status and political power. Another model to analyse the lower caste movements has been provided by Gail Omvedt who has interpreted the lower caste movements as 'anti-systemic movements', seeking to transform the basic structure of the Indian social system. Omvedt argues that these movements sought to replace caste and other types of social and political oppression through the establishment of an egalitarian society.<sup>28</sup>

Ambedkar was invited to the First Round Table Conference in London in 1930 to discuss the proposals of the Simon Commission. The Congress did not attend this conference. As one of the two representatives of the depressed classes, Ambedkar emphasised that untouchables needed political power to solve their problem. It could only be gained within the framework of an India that was independent.<sup>29</sup>

Gandhi and Ambedkar came to a direct clash at the Second Round Table Conference in December 1931. Ambedkar's demand for a separate electorate for the depressed classes went completely against Gandhi's idea of the unity of the Hindus. There was a wide divergence in their points of view- while Ambedkar stressed the need for political power for the Dalits, Gandhi insisted on reform and protection from above, since the problem of untouchability was, for him, a problem of the self, the 'collective Hindu self'. The fault, in Gandhi's view, lay in the politicisation of a 'social problem', i.e, untouchability. On the other hand, Ambedkar claimed that 'Gandhism' could offer no hope to the dalits as it did not represent any radical departure from the very institution of Hinduism, which was responsible for the oppression of the untouchables.

There was no consensus among the dalits over this issue. The M.C.Rajah group was

staunchly in favour of joint electorate and the Working Committee of their All India Depressed Classes Association in February 1932 deplored Ambedkar's demand for separate electorate and unanimously supported joint electorate with the Hindus, with provision of reservation of seats on the basis of population. An agreement, known as 'Rajah-Munje Pact', was also reached to this effect between Rajah and Dr.B.S.Munje, the president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. The dalit leadership was thus divided down the middle over the electorate issue.

The 1931 census had classified 82 castes as either "depressed" or "backward" with a total population of 7,756,301.<sup>30</sup> The main problem was to determine the number of seats to be reserved for these classes. Some wanted to accept the suggestion of the Simon Commission. While the Indian Franchise Committee recommended differential franchise to bring the depressed classes electorate up to their population ration or in any event as near as possible to 10% of their population strength. The Communal Award was announced in August 1932 which put an end to all contemplations. Under its provisions, members of the depressed classes, eligible for voting, were to vote as usual in the general constituencies.

Gandhi, in consonance with his threat at the Second Round Table Conference, resorted to his 'epic' fast unto death in the Yeravda prison, against the award on 20 September, 1932. Gandhi directed his fast only against separate electorate for depressed classes, not the several other minorities mentioned in the award. Threatened by the prospect of Mahatma's martyrdom, Ambedkar had to agree to a compromise.

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, president of the 1929 Congress Sub Committee on untouchability and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, called a conference on September 19, 1932, which sought a compromise solution as the Mahatma weakened in this Yeravda Prison cell. More than 100 caste Hindus and untouchables attended the conference, held between Bombay and Poona.<sup>31</sup> E.Zelliot argues that the Poona Pact, which resulted after 5 days of negotiations, bound together as a wide spectrum of political leaders from Malaviya to Ambedkar. Although Ambedkar lost on the issue of separate electorates, he won 148 reserved seats in the provincial legislatures, rather than the 78 allowed under the Communal Award.

Zelliot argues that signed by 97 caste Hindus and untouchables, the Poona Pact was not viewed as a victory by either side.<sup>32</sup> Ambedkar regretted the loss of separate electorates. Many Congress leaders felt that the number of seats reserved for Untouchables far outweighed the actual problem of Untouchability. The provisions of the pact were later incorporated into the Government of India Act of 1935.

Gandhi started the Harijan campaign to remove untouchability. Even there was co-operation between Gandhi and Ambedkar in relation to the activities of the newly founded Harijan Sevak Sangh. While Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh was involved in social issues, the Congress leaders needed a political front to mobilize dalit voters to win the reserved seats in the coming election. Thus, they founded in 1935, the All-India Depressed Classes League, with



Jagjivan Ram, a nationalist dalit leader as the president.<sup>33</sup>

Gail Omvedt describes the 1930s as the “years of radicalism”. Ambedkar in 1936 founded this Indian Labour Party (ILP) in a bid to mobilise the poor and the untouchables on a broader basis than caste alone- on a programme that proposed to advance the welfare of the labouring classes. In the election of 1937, the ILP performed well and won 11 out of the 15 reserved seats. However, the period saw increased tension between Dalit groups.

The process of the politicization of caste reached the highest point during this time. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay gives us example of the depressed caste politics of Bengal. In 1938, the scheduled caste members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly founded the Independent Scheduled Caste Party with Hemchandra Naskar as its president and Jogendranath Mandal as the secretary.<sup>34</sup> In 1942 Ambedkar formed his All India Scheduled Caste Federation, with its constitution claiming the dalits to be distinct and separate from the Hindus. Physical separation was proposed through establishment of SC villages, on government wastelands and private lands, overseen by a government established settlement commission. Village committees would form the basic AISCF organizational unit and provide funds through a tax.<sup>35</sup>

By the early 1940s, Periyar argued for a separate Dravidistan. In 1944, he established the ‘Dravida Kazhagam’. The aim was to establish a separate non-Brahman or Dravidian nation. Dirks points out that when Ambedkar met Periyar in 1944 to discuss joint initiatives, Ambedkar noted that the idea of Dravidisthan was in reality applicable to all of India, since Brahmanism was a problem for the entire subcontinent.<sup>36</sup>

The AISCF did not do well in the 1946 elections, although it secured many scheduled caste votes, it returned no candidates in Bombay and only one each in the Bengal and Central Province Legislatures. The defeat of AISCF candidates resulted in Congress claims that they represented SC interests.<sup>37</sup> The Cabinet Mission which visited India from March to June 1946 defined the Indian National Congress as the chosen representative of all constituencies except Muslims. As the SCs had no separate representation, they would be accommodated within an advisory committee to the constituent Assembly drawn from provincial legislatures.

Ambedkar responded furiously to this crisis of representation and adopted extra-parliamentary action to press the demand for recognition by staging a mass satyagraha to prove his popular support. But due to lack of organisation the agitation did not last long. Gail Omvedt states that the significant period of the 1940s thus appears as a basic defeat of Ambedkar’s basic project, that of creating a revolutionary and equalitarian mass political platform.<sup>38</sup>

E.Zelliot points out that the early years of independence found Ambedkar in a position from which he was able to operate constructively and cooperatively. He had won a seat in the Constituent Assembly from Bengal in 1946, and later, after partition, from Bombay. He was named Chairman of the drafting committee for the constitution and was included by Nehru as Law Minister in the first cabinet. Ambedkar responded with words which indicated separatism

was a thing of the past.<sup>39</sup> Cooperation, although not federation with any other organisation, should be the goal of the Scheduled Castes.

Recent studies clearly demonstrate that it is not as if castes are warming up to power considerations only after India became independent. The process of questioning established hierarchies began during the colonial period. From the first half of the 20th century, particularly from the 1930s, the social problem of caste discrimination attained political colour. Dalits under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar asserted themselves as the political minority. The establishment of democracy in independent India has introduced one major change in the way caste and politics interacts, and that is by making all castes legally equal. The Constitution recognizes no distinction of caste, class, religion in the rights it accords to all its citizens but has special provision of 'positive discrimination' for members of 'backward castes and classes'. This was the genesis of the much debated 'reservation' or compensatory discrimination, adopted as a temporary measure for ten years. Nehru was convinced that caste was an 'archaic' and 'parochial' institution that pertained entirely to the domain of the traditional-cultural.<sup>40</sup> It was to die out with the spread of education and growth of science and technology, i.e, with the blossoming of India as a modern nation. Thus, both Ambedkar and Nehru believed in the necessity of a strong centre for the uniform application of the Constitution and for implementing measures of modernization.

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