
**Poona Pact 1932: M.K. Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
and its Relevance**

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***Abstract:**Since the ancient time Indian Hindu society was mainly divided into four castes Brahmin Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra, one of which was the deprived caste namely the Shudras, they are most unprivileged in economic, social, religious and political aspects. To uplift their conditions by the many social reformers like Mahatma Kabir, Chaitanya, Pandita Ramabai, Jyotirao Phule and others raise the issue in society for their upliftment. But their condition remains the same. After the British came to India, educational opportunities were opened for this particular group of people. This paves the way for the emergence of leadership among themselves, one such leader was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who himself was untouchable by birth and fought for the licitrights of this community. However, during the British colonial rule when three round table conference (1931-1932) ware held in London to discuss thevarious issue of participation of all communities in future Indian administration and political participation. In fact, in this paper I want to show that in Poona pact what is the relevance of Gandhi and Ambedkar.*

***Keywords:**Communal Award,Hindu Society,Leader,Untouchable,Social Reormers etc.*

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Introduction

Every society has some unique features relating to classification, the status of women, participation in economic activities, and the right on national resources, in Europe, the serfdom was based on the economic ability of its members; in Egypt, it was based on colour; and in America, it was based on the capability of earning in the post – civil war era. But in India, right

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from the Vedic age, society was generally classified on the basis of four varnas; Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Later, we get reference about 18 castes, on the basis of profession. According to *Purusha Shukta*, the Four varnas Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are Metaphorically said to have emerged from the head, shoulders, thighs, and feet, respectively, of Purusha or the supreme creator. The social hierarchy of the castes is also supported in the Puranas, giving top priority to the Brahmans, caste at the topmost pinnacle, them to the Kshatriyas, them to the Vaishyas, and them to the Shudras. Sanjay Sonawani, in his work *The Origin of the Caste System: A new perspective* which was published in 2017 is connected with the caste with the socio- economic development of society in the Indian past. The Shreni system is also responsible for the emergence of professional castes in India. Whatever the origin of the caste system, the ultimate reality is that the privileged society systematically suppressed the right to live with dignity in society, more touch by an untouchable person to the higher caste is considered, a caste of impurity to their body. This caste has been mostly oppressed for the last 2000 years in all matters. From the 15th century CE to the 16th century CE, some socio- religious reforms talked about equal rights for their unprivileged people, but all these efforts were symbolic or theoretical without any licit provisions. Within a hundred years, a strong hold was established over the Indian society by some Christian missionary from Spain, Portugal, and other European countries. These Christian missionaries opened educational opportunities to all communities, irrespective of their birth or caste, and a number of educated persons can be noticed among these untouchable communities. One such person was, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who later become the undisputed leader of this downtrodden people. His idea of improving the condition of these untouchable people is to be provide within the legal framework. He has less faith in reform outside the legal frame. In the same way, another person who worked for the betterment of the of this Untouchables, was Mahatma Gandhi's idea was that, Harijan and Girijan were considered part and parcel of Hinduism, and once we get self-rule, will be provided equality on par with other communities within Hindu fold. During the freedom movement itself, under his leadership, started a constructive program to eradicate caste disparities. Once, he said that "I do not want another rebirth; if it is there for me, I wish to be born as Harijan", Dr. B. R. Ambedkar experienced untouchability, whereas Mahatma Gandhi felt untouchability. At the end of second round table conference in Landan, the British Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald announced the Communal award in which a separate electorate for Harijan and Girijan, just like other religious communities in India was given. Their differences between Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar were settled in Poona pact 1932.

Background of the Poona Pact

a. The world was based on the British theory that India was a nation, but a congeries of racial, religious and cultural groups, castes and interests.¹ Intensity of the swadeshi movement and the spread of extremists had forced upon the administration some new thoughts on constitutional reforms, while militant nationalism reinforced this process. Fresh thinking had started since

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1906, as secretary of state Lord Morley, a liberal scholar, urged to Viceroy Lord Minto to balance the unpopular Bengal partition with reforms. Although partition was declined to be a settled fact, there was also a realization that India could no longer be ruled with a “cast iron bureaucracy”. Indians should be given some share of power; they had to be admitted into the legislature, and if necessary, even into the executive council. In the legislature, sometime for budget discussion was to be allowed and amendments to government sponsored regulations were to be admitted; but at the same time, official majority was to be retained. There were three aspects of this new policy: outright repression on the one hand, concessions to rally the moderates on the other, match by divide and rule through separate electorates for the Muslims.²

The Indian Council Act of 1909 (Morley- Minto Reforms) provided for limited self-government and therefore satisfied more of the Indian political groups. It was the most short-lived of all constitutional reforms in British India and had to be revised within ten years. It did allow somewhere greater power for budget discussion, raising questions and sponsoring resolutions to members of legislative councils, who were to be elected for the first time. The act introduced the principle of election, but under various constraints. Details of seat allocation and electoral qualifications were left to be decided by local governments, and this left enough space for bureaucratic manipulation. Special provision was made for additional representation of professional classes, the landholders, the Muslims, as well as Europeans and Indian commerce, official majority was retained in the Imperial Legislative Council, which would have only 27 elected members out of 60; and out of those 27 seats, 8 were reserved for the Muslim separate electorate.³ Another objectionable aspect of the 1919 reforms was the communal electoral system. Earlier, the Morley- Minto reforms had adopted the communal electoral system. This time it is further expanded. Separate electoral system for minorities other than Muslims is accepted. Thus, indulging communal forces killed the political unit of India.⁴ Late 1927 when a Tory government in London appointed an all-white statutory commission under Sir John Simon to review the operation of the constitutional system in India. Non-inclusion of Indians in the commission provoked protests from all the political groups in India and resulted in a successful nationwide boycott-participated by both Congress and the Muslim League. When the Simon Commission arrived in India in the early 1928, it was greeted with slogans like “Go Back Simon”.⁵

First Round Table Conference and Gandhi-Irwin pact of 5 March 1931

When the civil disobedience movement was at its peak, the Simon Commission report was published on 7th June 1930 and the British government called a round table conference with various parties in India for constitutional reform. Congress objected to such a conference.⁶ While the Congress did not attend the roundtable conference, many others are willing to attend, it is so. From November 1930 to the end of January 1931, a round table conference was held in London without the Congress. Apart from Homi Modi, most of the Indian businessmen also did not attend the conference. However, Muslim leaders like

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Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Shafi Aga Khan, Jinnah, Fazul Haque, Hindu Mahasabha leaders Munje and Jayakar, liberal leaders Sapru, Chinta Moni, Srinivasan Shastri and several native kings attend this session. Sikhs and representatives of other minorities or backward classes also participated in the conference. But in the absence of the Congress all the conference become virtually meaningless, as the congress was the largest party in India.⁷ However, as soon the conference took place, the complexity of Indian politics was exposed. The picture of conflict between Indian's became clear. Muslims presented Jinnah's famous 14th points demand, including the demand for separate electorate on communal lines. On behalf of Scheduled caste community, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar also demanded separate electorate but Sikhs did not go down. In this way Sikh community demanded 30% seats in Punjab. Hindu remained steadfast in their demand for joint electorates. However, they accepted in principle the question of reservation of seats for minorities(except Bengal and Punjab).⁸When the round table conference was failed, the government sought a compromise with the congress and the British Prime Minister tried to that the Congress would join the next round table conference. Gandhi and other members of the Congress Working Committee were released unconditionally to convey or create the impression that the government was interested in negotiations with the congress. Meanwhile, after attending the round table conference, the liberal leaders Sapru and Jayakar wanted to convince the congress leaders that it was very necessary to come to an understanding with the government. But Gandhi initially showed no interest in negotiating with the government. Then in the month of mid- February, Gandhi changed his mind and he had to agreed discussion with Viceroy Irwin. These negotiations resulted in the Gandhi- Irwin pact (5th March, 1931).⁹However, in the end as per the terms of the Gandhi-Irwin pact to suspend the civil disobedience movement and attend the second-round table conference.¹⁰

The Second Round Table conference

The Second Round Table Conference in London held in September-December 1931. Congress had boycotted the first session of the conference; the second session dead-locked on the ministry issue, as not just the Muslims, but all other minorities, such as the depressed classes(untouchables), Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians and Europeans demanded separate electorates, which Gandhi was adamant not to concede. He came back to India and his only option was a renewal of the battle.¹¹

Communal Award

In the second session of the Second Round Table Conference Gandhi had opposed separate electorates to any other than the Muslims and had taken a very determined stand against reservation of seats for the Harijans. Upon return to India, an agreed solution to this vexed question of communal representation had to be found. Under such circumstances, in August 1932, Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald announced a communal award. This proposed communal award, among other things, a reservation of the number of seats for the

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Depressed Classes, (as the Harijans or Dalits were then termed) in a special constituency, and a specified number of reserved seats.¹² Gandhiji had written to the secretary of state intimating his resolve to resist with his life any establishment of separate electorates for the depressed classes. This, he held, would drive a wedge through the Hindu society and actually accentuate further degradation of the “depressed”. On 18th August 1932, the day following the announcement of the communal award, Gandhi confirmed to the prime minister Ramsay Macdonald’s earlier decision and announced that unless, by 20th September, this communal award, as affecting to the ‘Harijans’, was not amended he would enter upon a fast unto death ‘as an atonement’.¹³

Distribution of seats in the communal award, August 1932¹⁴

Group	Numbers of seats
General	80(Including 2 women)
Muslims	119 (Including 2 women)
Anglo -Indians and Christians	4+2 (Including 1 women)
Europeans	11
Commerce, Industry, Mining and plantation	19
Labour	8
Others (Including Landholders and university	7
Total	250

This award tried to divide Indians along religious, communal, class and caste lines. Apart from this other communities of India namely Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, Anglo- Indians and Europeans were recognized as minorities deserving separate representation. In order to divide the Hindu community on caste lines and following the request in the supplementary memorandum of the Minorities pact, a special provision was put for so called ‘untouchables’. This community would have the right to vote twice, once in the general

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electorates to elect a candidate in the general constituencies and second time to elect a candidate from among themselves in the category of the 'Untouchables'.¹⁵ Under these circumstances Gandhiji was deeply upset and realized that it was the begging of a significant situation among the unity of Hindus.

The Poona Pact 1932 and the political representation of depressed classes

The constitutional history of India took a dramatic turn when Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced his communal award in August 1932. It apportioned among Hindu communities and extended the provision of separate electorate to the untouchables as well.¹⁶ The nation owes a debt of gratitude to its Founding father, Gandhiji, incarcerated at that time in Yerwada Jail, Pune, for his willingness to sacrifice his life in order to reverse the award. Indeed, he had said no less at the Second Round Table. He understood that separate electorates for the 'Untouchables' would promote the politics of 'divide and rule' and balkanize India. From Gandhiji's prison cell in Yerwada, he told the Inspector General of Prisons, E.E. Doyle, that the award would completely divide among the Hindus in perpetuity. He noted that "Once the Legislature come into being, who can possibly alter the schism caused?".¹⁷ However, the award sought to create division among the Hindus by creating separate electorates for untouchables or depressed classes.¹⁸ Therefore Gandhiji decided to fast unto death for reverse the arrangement,¹⁹ on 20th September, 1932.²⁰ During this time Ambedkar received many threatening letters from caste Hindus.²¹ The nation panicked, although some of the depressed classes leaders like M.C. Rajah favored joint electorate, the most influential of them, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar saw in the provision of separate electorate the only hope of securing political representation for the untouchables.²² But Gandhiji, though opposed to separate electorate, was not averse to the idea of reserved seats, and Ambedkar too ultimately agreed to it, as the proposed number of such reserved seats for the depressed classes was increased and a two-tier election system was recommended to ensure proper representation of such classes. This proposal was considered on the basis of the Poona Pact on September 1932.²³ Once Gandhiji had approved, Madan Mohan Malaviya, M.R. Jayakar, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Chunilal Mehta, B.R. Ambedkar, M.C. Rajah, C. Rajagopalachari, G.D. Birla and 20 other leaders signed the Poona Pact on 24th September 1932. Gandhiji broke his fast on 26th September 1932.²⁴ This Poona Pact was also accepted by the British as an amendment to the communal award.²⁵ At last Gandhiji was released unconditionally by the British Government.²⁶

Provisions of the Poona Pact (1932)

The text of Poona Pact (1932) conducted between the Gandhiji and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the following agreement:^{27, 28}

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*The Poona Pact (1932) reserved seats for depressed classes out of general electorate seats in the Provincial Legislatures as follows, such as –in Madras 30, Bombay with Sind 15, Punjab 8, Bihar and Orissa 18, Central Province 20, Assam 7, Bengal 30, and Uttar Pradesh 20. The total number of the reserved seats for the depressed classes was 148. Later on, it would increase to 151.

*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 general 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.

*Representation of the depressed classes in the Central Legislature shall likewise be on the principle of joint electorates and reserved seats by the method of primary election in the manner provided for in Clause 2 above, for their representation in the Provincial Legislatures.

*In the Central Legislature, 18% of the seats allotted to the general electorate for British India in the said legislature shall be reserved for the depressed classes (Dalit or untouchables).

*The system of primary election to be a panel of candidate 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 6 below.

*The system of representation of the depressed classes by reserved seats in the Provincial and Central Legislatures as provided for in Clauses 1 and 4 shall continue until determined by mutual agreement between the communities concerned in the settlement.

*Franchise for the Central and Provincial Legislatures for the depressed classes shall be as indicated in the Lothian Committee report.

*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 election to local bodies or appointment to the Public Services. Every endeavor 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.

*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.

The Untouchables were sad because they had every reason to be. There are, however, people who do not accept this. They never fail to point out that the Poona Pact gave the Untouchables larger number of seats than what was given to them by the Prime Minister in his communal award. It is true that the Poona Pact gave the Untouchables 148 seats, while the award had only given them 78. But to conclude from this that the Poona Pact gave them more than what was given by the award is to ignore what the award had in fact given to the Untouchables.²⁹

All the more, with these self-denying activities of Gandhiji, his intension of the political activities was directed exclusive towards the abolition of untouchability among the Hindu

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society. At this moment Gandhiji, moved to Wardha and announced the gift of the Sabarmati Ashram to the Harijan Sevak Sanghain the month of September 1933. On November 7th Gandhiji set out on a countrywide tour and promote to the Harijan cause. During the next nine months he covered around 12,500 miles and penetrating into some of the remotest parts of the country, which were off the beaten track of national leaders. Gandhiji called “on caste Hindus to purge themselves of prejudice against the Harijans, and he urged the Harijans to shake off the vices (drugs and drink) which hindered their absorption into Hindu Society. He pleaded for the opening of temples to Harijans: ‘Temples are for sinners, not for saints; but who is to judge where no man is without sin?’ He ridiculed the superstition that anybody could be unclear by birth, or that the shadow or touch of one human being could define another human being. Bathing was all very well, he told a village audience, but even buffaloes had long daily baths.”³⁰

Gandhiji also wore himself out in making his collection for the Harijan Fund and within the ten months, who collected about 8,00,000 of rupees. Under these circumstances B.R. Nanda in the biographical work of Gandhiji, *Mahatma Gandhi – A Biography* he mentioned that about the Gandhiji, “if he had wished, have obtained this amount as a gift from a Maharaja or a millionaire, but he did set much store by money as such. The millions of men, women and children who contributed to his begging-bowl become fellow-soldiers in the campaign against untouchability.”³¹ The Harijan tour was by no means a triumphal progress for the untouchables. Gandhi was attacking an old age tyranny and long – established vested interests, which did not stick at anything to preserve themselves. The Sanatanists (orthodox Hindus) accused him of a dangerous heresy: they organized black-flag demonstration; they tried to heckle him and disrupt the meetings he addressed. On June 25th while he was on his way to the municipal hall in Poona, a bomb was thrown at his party; seven persons, including the chief officer of the municipal committee, were injured, but Gandhi was unhurt.³² Even though the opposition of the Sanatanists died hard, and even though militant leaders were critical, Gandhi succeeded in piercing an ancient sore. In an article ‘The Revolution is Over’, Rajagopalachari, the well-known Congress leader from Madras, wrote: ‘Untouchability is not yet gone. But the revolution is really over and what remains is but the removal of the debris.’ This was probably an optimistic statement, but there is no doubt that the reformists had made a good beginning. The Congress Ministries in 1937-39 removed some of the legal disabilities of the Harijans and untouchability itself became illegal in the constitution of free India. A social tyranny which had deep roots needed a continuous war on all fronts, legal, social and economic, and for many years to come.³³ Another way, Ambedkar was a believer in the ‘unity of society’. He organized the depressed classes to work in unison with others, so that no wall might be created between the different classes of the society.³⁴ In 1936, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party to fight the election mandated under the new Government of India Act of 1935. In later years the party changed its name twice, becoming, first, the Scheduled Caste Federation and later, the Republic Party of India.³⁵ In the election of 1937,³⁶ The provincial elections revealed the strength of the Congress as an all-India force. It contested 1161 seats in the general constituencies and won 716. It won a clear majority in six out of the eleven provinces in British India, and emerged as the single largest party in three other

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provinces. The Congress routed the Hindu Mahasabha in UP and Punjab and disabled it politically.³⁷ The Congress was generally successful in the seats reserved for undeveloped Harijans, but in Bombay Province, the Independent Labour Party led by Ambedkar captured 13 out of the 15 seats.³⁸ The achievement in the Muslim – majority provinces was less remarkable. It contested only 56 out of 482 Muslim seats and won 28. It did not secure a single Muslim seat in Uttar Pradesh (U.P), Punjab and Bengal. But it fared well in Muslim majority North- West frontier province.³⁹ The Congress weakness in the Muslim- majority provinces did not necessarily reflect the communal trends between the Hindu and Muslims. The League was also unable to contest all the Muslim seats. In a voting system based on separate electorates it won only 4.8 percent of the total Muslim vote in India and was unable to form a government in any Muslim majority province. It lost to the intercommunal regional Unionist Party in Punjab, and the Krishan Praja Party in Bengal. In Punjab it contested 7 and won 2 out of 84 Muslim seats. In Sind it won only 3 out of 33 Muslim seats. Of the 117 Muslim seats in Bengal, it obtained 38. The League clearly lacked a popular base in the Muslim- majority provinces.⁴⁰ The poor performance of both the Congress and League in the Muslim seats showed that communal questions did not play a major role in the elections of 1937.⁴¹ In April 1942, Ambedkar formed the Scheduled Castes Federation as an All -India Political Party. Thereafter, in July 1945, he founded the ‘People’s Education Society,’ to promote the interests of the scheduled castes. This society started a number of colleges in the Bombay Presidency for scheduled caste students.⁴²

Ambedkar got elected from Bengal in 1946 to the Constitutional Assembly. On account of the partition of India, he lost that seat: as such, he was elected to the Constitutional Assembly in July 1947 from Bombay and joined the Nehru Cabinet as Law Minister in August 1947. Ambedkar was appointed as a Chairman of Drafting Committee of the Constitution assembly on 19 August 1947.⁴³ Ambedkar lost his election to the Parliament in February 1952, but was nominated by the Bombay Legislature to the Council of States(Rajya Sabha) in May 1952.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The visit of the Simon Commission and subsequent civil disobedience in 1930 led to anarchical conditions in India. The British Government in England wants early peace in India, because they very worried about Europeans development with the emergence of Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy. The competition going on in Africa for colonies and the unrest in other colonies of England compelled India to make peace with India, any conflict which will escalate in Europe, the help of India is Must for Britain to sustain. Indian pressure on civil disobedience and individual satyagraha also compelled England to call the Round Table Conference in London to settle the Indian issue of responsible government. During the round table conference, the Congress representative was absent at the first- round table conference. After the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, the Indian National Congress agreed to send its representative, Gandhi was sent as the sole representative of INC. In the Second- Round Table Conference, Gandhiji participated, on question, as a separate electorate to the Harijan and Girijan of India, came out of the conference, returned to India. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a great

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economist scholar, and good orator, was able to convince the British government of his demands and pass the communal award in his community's favour. His argument in favour of a separate electorate is available in the round table conference proceeding. He also able to convince the British cabinet that, just like the Muslims, the untouchables also are different from the caste Hindus, we never have marriage relations; we do not celebrate festivals with them; just there is only one situation; it is for normal work, and the result is a separate electorate. Mahatma Gandhi opposed this argument, saying that the Harijan and Girijan are part and parcel of Hindu society; we give equal right once we get a responsible government. As we know, when Gandhi came back to India, when communal award was declared by the British Government, he started the fast unto the death. Due to pressure from the Indian National Congress and others congress leaders, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar agreed to understand the Poona Pact, which gives reservation in central and provincial legislative assembly seats for the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST). After the independence, based on this provision, reservation in government jobs and public representation are extended for these communities. If we raised the question the need for reservation validity, one thing we can say is that the representatives of SC and ST most cases failed to get elected to general seats. The only reason for this community representation is reserved seats. So, the Poona Pact is the harbinger of the reservation system, not demanded by Dr. Ambedkar but compiled by caste Hindus. So, there is a close relationship between the Poona Pact and the reservation system of present-day in India.

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