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Mahatma Gandhi and Dalit Problem

Pannalal Surana

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IN
A SANE CIVILIZATION

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Preface

In India, the term Dalit connotes a group of castes which were treated as untouchables. Placed at the lowest rung of the hierarchy of caste ladder, they were expected to do manual labour, including scavenging, cleaning of public roads and the like. According to religious tradition of the Vedas these castes were considered to be polluting the upper castes by mere touch or even by casting their shadows over. They were not permitted to enter temples or draw water from the common village well. They were denied basic human rights like education, right to limb, life, occupation, holding property, equality before law.

All this was obnoxious and repulsive. Many saints right from Bhagwan Buddha of 6th century B.C. to Tukaram of the 17th century decried the injustice heaped on these castes. But the general public were afraid to offend the priestly class who had assumed the role of the custodian of the religion. This unjust custom continued to regulate the affairs of the Hindu community for centuries together.

It was in the nineteenth century that serious efforts were attempted by some social reformers like Jyotiba Fule to criticize and disobey the dictates of the priestly class while extending brotherly treatment, based on equality, to the dalits. All such social reformers had to face ire and even physical torture at the hands of the priestly class and also other upper caste people who were enjoying various privileges under the traditional system. When the Britishers took over the reins of political power, they were

not bound by the dictates of Vedic traditions. They despised the custom of untouchability as also various other unjust customs thrust on women. With the establishment of the rule of law and new judicial system, as also new educational structure, tyrannical clutches of the priestly classes were loosened to considerable extent. The new class of educated Hindus started realizing the wicked and unjust nature of caste system, particularly of untouchability. In their behaviour, they started ignoring all those barriers of touch and segregation. Some activists started schools and hostels for children of the poor families and giving admissions to the children of untouchables as well. New awakening started spreading in the society, though only at a snail's pace.

In the second half of nineteenth century, political activity started gathering momentum in a democratic way. Educated people started demanding establishment of democratic institutions. After the failure of the 1857 uprising, Queen Victoria of England had published a manifesto declaring that, instead of the East India Company, the British Government in England would directly manage the governance of India. Executive powers were vested in the Viceroy and Governor General. For some time, he used to issue decrees laying down laws. People started demanding separation of legislative powers from the executive. The British Parliament had passed Indian Council Act in 1861 which provided for a system of nominating a few high officials on the Central Legislative Council. Political activists and journalists started clamouring for popular representation on the Council. The only concession made by the British was to invite panels from universities and District Local Boards and Municipal Corporations for nomination on the Council. By the turn of the century, the rulers contemplated introducing a system of electing representatives to the Council. That sparked off a chain of raising

sectoral demands. The Muslims, in particular, pleaded that they, being the former rulers, deserved special treatment in the form of representation higher than their proportion in population and separate electorate. The rulers with a view to driving a wedge in the unity of the Indian people, granted those demands. The nationalist leaders did not like it; but in the interest of forging wider unity of the Indian people gulped the sour pill and pursued the course of expanding and intensifying the movement for national liberation.

As noted above, the plight of the dalit castes was being attended to by various social reformers. Vithal Ramaji Shinde drew attention towards their problem. At the beginning of the twentieth century, demands were raised for reservation in government jobs for the dalits. Demand for representation in the legislative council was also raised in 1928. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar mentioned it while giving oral evidence before the Simon Commission. The British rulers, instead of widening the franchise and the powers of the legislative and executive wings at the provincial level, seized the opportunity to drive new wedge in the unity of Indian people and granted separate electorate for the dalits by the Communal Award of 1932. Mahatma Gandhi, the sole representative of the Congress at the Round Table Conference, opposed it. He said that the unity of Indian people was likely to be fractured by the award and it would expose the vulnerable sections to the ire of the upper castes on whom the dalits were dependent for their employment and livelihood. Gandhi started indefinite fast for dropping the provision for the separate electorate for the dalits. Great pressure of public opinion came to be exerted on Dr. Ambedkar who, not very happily, had finally agreed to the Yerawada Pact which included reserved seats, instead of separate electorate, for the dalits as also reservation in government jobs and other matters.

This caused a schism. Many of the dalit intellectuals feel that Gandhi had come in the way of their getting substantial share in the political power. In fact, Gandhi had championed the cause of the dalits on the national level. He did say that he was proud of his religion, i.e. Hinduism. But he had declined to observe untouchability right from his childhood. In his personal behaviour, he had treated members of dalit castes as equals. He had consistently propagated abolition of the wicked custom by saying that a true religion can never prescribe such vicious customs. He had succeeded in arousing the conscience of the upper caste people and exhorted them to treat their dalit brethren on equal terms. In his view, abolition of untouchability was an important prop of new democratic India, besides Hindu-Muslim unity and gender equality. He had initiated, on national scale, various programmes for social, educational and economic empowerment of the dalits. These programmes, and the ideology underlying them, are still relevant and useful. The objective of this study is to trace the developments related to this problem and viewpoints of the two main players, Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi with a hope that the readers will find it useful in understanding some of the enigmatic events of recent Indian History.

The author records his gratitude to the Centre for Gandhian Studies, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, for giving him opportunity, as visiting expert, to do this study.

Mahatma Gandhi and Dalit Problem

Mohandas was son of Karamchand and Putalibai Gandhi who belonged to bania caste. The family was particular about observing religious practices like daily visiting temple to offer homage to the deity called Lord Vishnu. Putalibai used to observe umpteen number of fasts. She would prod young Mohan to visit temple every day. Quite soon, the boy discontinued that practice and told the mother that he did not like to follow such practices blindly. However, the mythical stories of Raja Harishchandra and of Shravan who served his parents devotedly had made a deep impression on his mind. He also took to heart an age-old saying, *Nirbal ke bal Ram* (Ram is the protector of the weak).

In his autobiography, **My Experiments With Truth**, Gandhi had recorded an incident that occurred in 1883. He was then 12 years old. A scavenger used to visit the house to clean latrine. On his finishing the work, the mother used to ask Mohan to give bread to him and would say, "Do not touch him".

"Why not" asked the boy.

"Because our religion says so", pat came the reply.

Mohan was not convinced. He started touching the man while giving bread and also enquiring about his family.

In the house, there was a copy of Manusmriti, considered to be one of the holy scriptures of Hindu religion. It contained laws and rules about many aspects of worldly life. Mohan cursorily went through it. "Why is there so much discrimination made between

Brahmins and Shudras?" he tried to argue with the uncle and elder brother. Instead of explaining and discussing, they dismissed him by saying that he would understand it when he would grow old. "The book does not preach non-violence" mused young Mohan and put it aside forever.

Mohan passed his matriculation in 1887. There were a few Muslims and a Christian amongst the friends of his cousin. They used to talk proudly about their eating non-vegetarian food and drinking liquor. All that was abhorrent to Mohan. "What kind of religions they have?" he wondered.

After a while, Gandhi went to England to conduct further studies. Before embarking on the journey, at the behest of his mother, Mohan vowed not to touch non-vegetarian food, liquor or women.

In those days, it was difficult for the "blacks" to get a room on rent in London. They were also prohibited from entering hotels. However, a white Christian helped Gandhi get entry into a hotel. That man goaded him to meet a Christian missionary. The latter tried to persuade Gandhi to adopt that religion. Gandhi was perplexed. He studied the Holy Quran and Bible. For understanding the essence of Hinduism, he sought advice of Raichandbhai, his mentor, who told him to study Geeta. That he did, but was not satisfied. "Is my religion so bad that I should give it up? And is another religion, say Christianity or Islam, so good that I may adopt it?" The two questions kept hounding him. Gandhi has recorded his thoughts in the following words, "Thus I could not accept Christianity as a perfect, or greatest religion, neither was I convinced of Hinduism being such. Hindu defects were pressingly visible to me. If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or excrescence. I could not understand the *raison d'être* of a multitude of sects and castes.

What was the meaning of the dictum that the Vedas were the inspired words of God? If they were inspired, why not also the Bible and the Quran?". (p.126-7 **My Autobiography**, reprint, 2003.)

So Gandhi did not change his religion.

When he was staying at Durban in South Africa, persons belonging to various religions and castes came into his contact. Some of his friends and assistants used to stay with him as family members. In those days there was no acqua privy or public drainage systems. One had to use a pot for easing himself and then clean it by throwing the contents in the pit outside. Once, in 1889, a person from South India, who was born in an untouchable family but converted to Christianity, joined him as assistant, and came to stay. Next morning, he used the pot put in the bathroom but did not clean it. As a courtesy to the guest, Gandhi preferred not to ask him to do the cleaning. Instead, he asked his wife, Kasturba to do the job. On her denying to do so, Gandhi shouted at her and asked her to get out of the house and advanced to do the job himself. "You may behave atrociously, but I do not want to spoil the good name of our family" said Kasturba and went to the bathroom to do the needful. Gandhi also realized his stupidity and apologised. After reconciliation, the couple discussed the matter and Kasturba declared that thenceforth she would also not observe untouchability And, till the end of her life, she proved true to her word.(*ibid*, p255). In fact, one girl, born as untouchable, used to stay with the Gandhis in their abode at Sewagram Ashram.

Instead of running individual household, they preferred as a matter of principle to stay in an Ashram (commune). All the inmates were doing various chores like cleaning bathrooms and the premises, shoe-making, carpentry, etc. They were liberated from the age-old traditions of not doing manual labour or of

looking down upon those who were doing it.

When the main problems haunting the people of Indian origin in South Africa were more or less resolved, Gandhi family returned to India for good. He founded Satyagraha Ashram near Ahmedabad on 15 May 1915. Donations started flowing in to meet the expenses of the Ashram. One of the donors casually asked Gandhi whether he would allow an untouchable to stay at the Ashram. Gandhi replied in the affirmative. The friend jocularly remarked, "As the rules framed by you for the inmates are so stringent, there is no possibility of any untouchable person approaching you for that." After a few days, Amritlal Thakkar wrote Gandhi a letter saying that one teacher, untouchable by birth, namely Dodabhai, along with his wife Daniben and daughter Laxmi, wanted to stay with him in the Ashram. To that, Gandhi readily agreed. On that many eye-brows were raised. After three-four months, the stocks of food-grains were depleted and no fresh donations were coming. One day, the manager of the Ashram told Gandhi that the provisions would last barely for 3-4 days and there was no balance to fall back upon. Gandhi coolly said that they would close down the establishment, shift to a dalit basti and earn livelihood by doing manual work. However, after a few days, a sizable amount came as an anonymous donation. When, after the Dandi March of 1930, Gandhi founded Sewagram Ashram near Wardha and made it his permanent abode, number of untouchable families came to reside and participate in various activities of Gandhi.

Line of thinking

Here, it may be useful to have a glance at the line of thinking and activity that Gandhi chalked out for himself. Before entering Indian politics, Gandhi had participated in a number of activities in South Africa. Actually he had not planned them but they happened incidentally. One Indian trader, doing business there,

had engaged Gandhi as his lawyer and taken him to that country.

It was in the eighteenth century that a number of European settlers had established large farms and colonies in South Africa and started exercising political power. As the local residents were lacking in cultivation skills, the British settlers, who enjoyed hegemony over there, carried agricultural labourers from Bihar, Tamilnadu etc. and some traders from India to South Africa. The labourers were bound by an agreement, so they became known as '*girmitya*' in Hindi colloquial language. The rulers were practising apartheid policy. There was segregation in every field of life forced upon the African as well as the people of Indian origin. Many insults and injustices used to be heaped on them. Gandhi, while traveling in a first class compartment with a valid ticket, was thrown out by a white traveler who had boarded the train on a midway station. For the whole night, while sitting on the platform, Gandhi was fuming by the insult and was thinking of returning back to India but in the morning he was determined to stay there and fight back the injustice. Besides discharging his professional duties, Gandhi used to listen to the stories of the poor labourers and traders. The rulers had issued a farman saying that every person of Indian origin would have to carry with him/her a permit with finger prints. At one gathering, Gandhi suggested that they all collectively defy the order and burn permit papers. That was the beginning of Satyagraha. (6 September 1906.)

Gandhi had to visit England two or three times in connection with the problems of Indians in South Africa. On one such visit in 1903, he came to know that a number of Indian students in London were getting associated with the secret groups that were indulging in violent activities. Gandhi felt sad because he felt that the British Rule in India could not be ended by such surreptitious activities by a handful of persons. On the contrary, that would provide an excuse for the British to enhance oppression. Organising masses

through open, peaceful activities alone would exert enough pressure on the British to quit.

Another matter that had seized his mind was the inhuman aspect of industrial civilization, based on cut-throat competition by the profit mongers. The competition was heaping untold misery on the vast masses of working class people. He read writings of thinkers like Ruskin and Tolstoy who were very critical of industrialization. In his journal called *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi had expressed his thoughts on this issue. In 1909, he wrote out a booklet, namely, **Hind Swaraj**, in which he elaborated his ideas about the future of Indian society. He advocated a peaceful, decentralised society, in which there would be no discrimination based on religion, caste, race, gender or wealth. Manual labour would not be despised. There would be equality for all.

His decision not to change religion is already alluded to. By the turn of the century, he gave deep consideration to the subject of religion. He studied Pantanjali's *Yogasutra*, the *Geeta* and the book called *Rajayoga* by Vivekananda. He imbibed some of the ideas of Theosophy which while discarding many rituals rampant in the Hindu tradition and also dismissing the hegemony of the Brahmins or the priestly class in religious matter had preferred a simple way of worshipping God the Almighty, by offering prayers only. Gandhi wrote out a book, **Anasakti Yoga** (Discipline of Austerity), and pleaded that even the *Geeta* does not preach violence. Lokamanya Tilak, in his epitome called *Geeta Rahasya* (the Secret of *Geeta*), had stated that *shatham prathi shathayam* (or Tit for Tat), was the teaching of *Geeta*. After expressing high respect to the great leader, Gandhi begged to differ. He propounded that the real teaching of that holy book was "*Shatham prathi api Satyam*" (Truth even against Wickedness).

Gandhi did say that he was a Hindu and was proud of it. But he

declined to perform any of the rituals prescribed by any of the Hindu sects. He also dismissed the hegemony of the priestly class. He was deeply impressed by the ideology of the saints like Narsi Mehta. His favourite bhajan was *Vaishnava jana to tene kahiye jo peed parayi jane re* (Call him a God's man who understands the agonies of the others.) Gandhi had also written a small book, **Ethical religion.**

Gandhi did believe in God, but not in the form in which the sectarian religions had depicted Him. He used to say, "Truth is the God". When at a female gathering in London in 1931 he was asked "What do you mean by Truth?" Gandhi replied, "By Truth, I mean Right (as against wrong) or Justice. "One may feel that this was just a jugglery of words. But one should try to understand that while distancing himself from sectarianism and unjust customs enforced in the name of religion, he wanted to drive home the need for spirituality that helps a man to pull himself up from the evil instincts latent in him, and sublimate his life. Another of his saying is; "Service to the people is the true worship of God". (*Jana Seva hi Ishwar Seva*). From this, it may be concluded that, in the name of religion he did not want anybody to be thrown to the tortures of the priestly classes.

British policy of 'Divide and Rule'

As mentioned earlier, modern political movement started gathering momentum in the second half of the nineteenth century. Direct British rule extended to almost two-thirds of the country, while about six hundred and odd royal families, or "princes" as the British preferred to call them, while accepting the British as the Paramount Power, ruled over their kingdoms. They varied in size. Some like Hyderabad or Jammu and Kashmir were large while a few were restricted to a bunch of four-five villages. The political system there was mostly feudal and the inhabitants were

treated more as 'subjects' than as citizens. They could not participate in decision making nor could they express their reactions. In the British area, however, educated classes started demanding various rights that were available to the citizens in Great Britain. A number of journals and daily newspapers were supplying information about the decisions and the deeds of the authorities and readers' views were given space.

Various associations were formed in different parts of the country which started raising demands for different sections. In 1885, the Indian National Congress was founded. Initially, it gave expression to the aspirations of the educated people, who wanted to enter government service, or of the traders and professionals. Very soon, grievances of farmers and workers were also taken up. The leaders made conscious efforts to forge wider united front of all India character. Prominent persons like Umeshchandra Bannerji, Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tayyabji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale were elected presidents of the annual gatherings. The Congress was emerging as a powerful body and started demanding protection to the Indian industry and the farmers from the hegemonic competition by the British enterprises. This started hitting the business interests of the British directly. Main objective of the British Raj in India was to subjugate Indian economy and extract more and more wealth for the vested interests back home.

The Congress was galvanizing patriotic youths on the issues of boycott of foreign goods, particularly cloth (which was the leading product of the British industry) and encouraging use of swadeshi commodities. A number of idealistic youths started 'nationalist' schools and colleges parallel to those run by the government. These institutions developed into breeding ground for the activists and volunteers of the freedom struggle.

Utterances by some dignitaries added insult to injury. At a

function in 1904, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy and Governor General stated that there was no entity like Indian Nation. While angry protests were expressed in print media as also on public platform, Lord Curzon declared that the province of Bengal would be split in two parts: Muslim dominated eastern and Hindu dominated western ones. This put the whole of Bengal on flame. Local revolutionary leaders like Aurobindo Ghosh, inspired by Lokmanya Tilak, carried on vehement propaganda against the British. The whole of India stood firm behind Bengal.

The rulers realized that they can safeguard their interests only by dividing the Indian people. Initially, they could harness the fighting qualities of the 'lowly' castes like Mahars in Maharashtra to conquer one kingdom after another. When they were firmly entrenched, they tried to win over the upper caste people who were eager to enter government service, civil as well as military. When caste Hindus were recruited in the military in sizable numbers and when the latter expressed their unhappiness in serving alongwith, or worse still as subordinate to the dalits, the rulers adopted policy of not recruiting the Mahars.

The British policy makers, cunning as they were, started thinking of alienating the Muslims, who were a numerical minority and very proud of the recent history when they were the rulers in various parts of India, from the Congress. Some officials indirectly encouraged leaders of Muslim zamindars in northern, eastern and western India and the new professionals in the central and southern parts of the country to organize a political party of their own. Thus came into existence the Muslim League which played havoc culminating in the partition of India.

Under the leadership of Prince Aga Khan, a religious leader, a delegation called upon the Viceroy and asked for separate electorate for the Muslims and more than proportionate

representation for them in the Central Legislative Council.

The secular movement conducted by the Congress suffered a severe setback. By introducing communal representation based on religion, seeds of mutual antagonism were sown. A section of the Hindus formed a party called Hindu Maha Sabha in 1908. Acrimonious exchanges started flying. Frequency of communal riots increased.

The nationalist leadership tried to overcome these wicked games of the rulers by focusing on the issues of the toiling masses. For uttering the nationalistic mantra of "Swaraj is my birthright", Lokamanya Tilak was sentenced for six years. Thereupon, the industrial workers of Bombay observed one day strike as protest against the authorities who punished their "Hero"

For some time, there was a spurt in violent attacks on the British officers by various secret groups of revolutionaries. Level of unrest had risen considerably. The rulers decided to nullify the partition of Bengal. Various leaders realized that violent attacks on the British were counter-productive. They exhorted the youth that such acts were futile and they would do well to engage themselves in programmes of mass awakening. Problems of the farmers and workers came to be focused on various fora.

Vithal Ramaji Shinde, an activist of the Prarthana Samaj founded by Mahadeo Govind Ranade and others to cleanse the Hindu religion by liberating it from various superstitions and rituals, had established Depressed Classes Mission at Pune in 1906. It was engaged in spreading education amongst the untouchable by running schools and hostels. In a way, that was revival of the activities started by Mahatma Jyotiba Fule long back in the middle of the nineteenth century, who rebelled against the orthodox tradition and allowed access for the untouchables to his water

tank. He also opened schools for their children. Similar activities were started in Bengal by the activists of Brahmo Samaj, in Punjab by Arya Samaj and also in the south. Vithal Ramaji Shinde thought that running such humanitarian institutions was not enough. The problem must also be tackled at political level.

On his release from the prison in 1914 Lokmanya Tilak declared that he would re-enter the Congress fold which he had deserted in 1906 at Surat. By then, Mohamaed Ali Jinnah had become President of the Muslim League. The two leaders met and decided to forge unity of the Hindus and Muslims. Jinnah pleaded with Tilak that the Congress would do well to recognize separate electorate as an accomplished fact so that the two can join hands. Whatever was given by the authorities cannot be changed so soon. Tilak agreed and moved a resolution to that effect at the Lucknow Congress in 1916.

First World War had broken out in Europe. Almost all the leaders decided to help the Government in war efforts. Issues concerning the common people were also being raised.

Vithal Ramaji Shinde, in an article had drawn the attention of the country to the problems of the dalits by saying that "one-sixth of India was untouchable". It created a stir in the public mind. Shinde approached Congress leaders with a suggestion that the vanguard of national liberation movement should pass a resolution about the problem of untouchability. There emerged wider agreement and a resolution urging the people of India to give up the practice of untouchability and allow them to enter schools, public water sources, temples, etc. was drafted. Gandhi had started doing Congress work though till then he had not entered the high echelons of leadership. At the Kolkata Congress, he helped Shinde on the untouchability resolution to be passed in the open session in 1917.

In 1924, a Satyagraha was launched at Raisen in the South. Vithal Ramaji Shinde was the chief organizer. He very much wanted Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya and Gandhi to participate in it. They could not do so, Shinde got exasperated and wrote a strong letter to Gandhi, saying, "You are not devoting enough time for the cause of the untouchables. Your first priority is Hindu-Muslim unity. Next is Khadi. And then comes the untouchables."

To that, Gandhi sent a reply from Sabarnati on 12-12-1924, saying "Your letter chased me from place to place. I am sorry for the delay in replying. Your saying that untouchable problem is my third priority is not true. I consider it equally important as the other two mentioned. You are great, because you are concentrating on that problem".

For Gandhi, untouchability was not an isolated problem. It was an important ingredient of the wider struggle for national freedom. Mere ending the foreign rule was not true independence. In a speech at about 1916, Gandhi observed, "My patriotism does not teach me that I allow people to be crushed under the heel of Indian priests or princes. By patriotism I mean welfare of the whole people....It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. Such swaraj has to be experienced by each for himself. What others get for me is not swaraj but foreign rule." (p.106 **Mahatma** vol. 1 D.G.Tendulkar)

At Kolkata Congress, one Shri Ramchandra Shukla from Champaran district in Bihar beseeched Gandhi to visit to see the plight of the kisans. British Government, for the benefit of the textile industry in England, were forcing the peasants to grow *neel* in three kalthas of every bigha of land that they were cultivating. Price paid to that crop was very low. But more than that, the crop was causing great damage to other crops in the adjoining pieces of land. Gandhi went there, organised a group of lawyers from

Patna to study and record the grievances of the peasants and presented a memorandum to the Viceroy urging to stop the exploitation of the poor peasants. British businessmen and district officials in charge of law and order had tried their best to harass the team but Gandhi and his colleagues stood fast. Ultimately, the authorities had to yield and concede many of the demands of the peasants. Before bidding farewell, Gandhi established a few schools for the children of the kisans as also of the dalits.

There was drought in some districts of Gujarat. Revenue authorities were insistant about the collection of land revenue. Vallabhbhai Patel organized a rally of the farmers at Bardoli and invited Gandhi to address it. In his speech Gandhi, besides criticizing the British Raj for their oppressive and inhuman attitude to the kisans, also raised the problem of the untouchability. Thereupon, the rally passed a resolution appealing the people to give up that practice and start treating the dalits as their brethren. Another resolution was passed urging the activists of the Congress to devote themselves to the constructive activities like Hindu-Muslim unity, spread of literacy, nationalist education, abolition of untouchability and promotion of Khadi. That was the Gandhi style of conducting a popular movement - blending combative and constructive programmes and insisting on non-violent means.

At the national level anti-British agitation was getting intense. At that time, there were two Home Rule Leagues, one in South led by Annie Besant, the great theosophist, and another led by Tilak in the west and north India. For one of her aggressive speeches, the lady was interned. There was popular demand for her release but the authorities were adamant. For the presidentship of the Congress to be held soon, Tilak's name was gathering support. But he said that "if we want the Government to release the lady, let us elect her instead of me." The suggestion was accepted. Hence the authorities had to release Dr. Besant. She, in

her turn, while addressing the Congress, vehemently attacked various anti-people policies of the British Raj.

For quite some time various political formations, while cooperating with the British Government in their war against undemocratic Germany, had started demanding various political reforms. The franchise, in the Indian Councils Act of 1909, was restricted to the graduates of the universities, or income tax payers, or land owners paying land revenue over a specified limit, etc. As a result, very few people, highly educated and the rich, were enjoying the right to vote. There was demand for expanding it considerably. Some also asked for adult franchise. Tilak, in one of his editorials in 1917 in the *Kesari*, had supported that suggestion. Another demand was to accord Dominion Status to India like it was done in case of Canada or South Africa. With that status, while leaving the overall control of the British Crown undisturbed, elected representatives would be entrusted with running the day-to-day administration of the country. The war had taught the British a few lessons. Indian soldiers had fought bravely in the far off fields like Africa and Turkey. That helped a lot in finally winning the war.

Hence sentiments of the Indian people were to be given due weight. The war had obstructed shipping of British goods to India thereby causing scarcity of necessities of life. Establishing various industries on this land was called for. The British rulers adopted a conciliatory tone and announced that substantial powers would be granted to the people. But the Morley-Minto package, when made public, came as a damp squib. Both the main demands were bypassed. In the Government of India Act, 1919 the franchise was expanded but marginally. No powers were transferred to the Indian hands. And, on top of it, the two Rowlatt bills were passed giving draconian powers to the authorities to suppress popular movements. In particular, severe restrictions were placed on the

newspapers and printing presses.

Gandhi reacted sharply. He announced that a satyagraha campaign to oppose the Rowlatt laws would be launched soon. A chain of public meetings was organised by Lala Lajpatrai in various towns in Punjab. He personally led Lahore morcha. The police lathi-charged, in which Lalaji was gravely injured and ultimately died. At a protest rally held in Jalianwala Bagh of Amritsar, the military massacred hundreds of innocent men and women. A wave of protest and anger swept all over the country.

Another development took place. During the war, when Turkey switched side and agreed to join hands with the British, the latter had given an assurance that after the war was over, the latter would not disturb the status of the ruler there, who had enjoyed both temporal and religious powers. Specifically, his status as Khalifa, the head priest of the Muslims all over the world, would be maintained. After the conclusion of the hostilities, the British went back on their assurances and the post of Khalifa was abolished. That sparked off a chain of protest by the Muslims the world over. Muslims in India also got perturbed. They organized a Khilafat Conference at Mumbai in 1920. Gandhi was elected its president. It was decided to launch a mass movement against the British. The Congress, on its part, had chalked out a similar course of action to press for various political demands. At this crucial juncture, India suffered a great loss. Lokmanya Tilak, the great leader of Indian freedom movement, passed away. After they came out of the daze, people silently elected Gandhi as his successor. He had already endeared himself to the multitude of Indian people by his saintly behaviour, use of Hindustani or other local languages for public dialogue and by championing the causes of the toiling masses. Intense agitation gripped the country.

Personally, Gandhi was taking keen interest in organizing Khadi production. There was shortage of cloth in the market and at the same time, millions of people were unemployed. Gandhi said that only blaming the British would not help. We should start enterprises to provide means of livelihood to the poor. Right from 1917, he had initiated work in the field of spinning. With the help of a dalit woman, Jammuadevi, he found out a group of weavers who, for want of the demand for their products, had closed down. As part of freedom movement, Gandhi urged the people to boycott the cloth manufactured by the foreign industrialists and start using Khadi. Production centres were started in different parts of the country. Right from Tamil Nadu and Kerala to Himachal Pradesh and U.P., in the North, Bihar and Bengal in the east, thousands of production centres as also Khadi Bhandars (sale counters) sprang up providing employment to a large number of people. Akhil Bharat Charkha Sangh was formed to coordinate the activities. As per its annual report of 1940, 2,75,176 persons in 13,451 villages were engaged. They had received Rs.34,85,609 as wages. (at that time wage rate was about two or three paise daily) Amongst the workers, 19,645 were Harijans, and 57,578 Muslims. That was indeed a massive programme of empowerment for the dalits. Gandhi had also prodded the people to use products of village handicrafts.

Potters, oilmen, cobblers etc. got their occupations revived. This was a real way of building New India, consolidating bonds of brotherhood through economic betterment.

After the passage of untouchability resolution by the Congress, activists helped dalit children get admissions in the schools. At some places, it was stoutly opposed by the local orthodox elements. Many government officials expressed helplessness. Under such circumstances, separate schools for the dalits were established with the help of the District Local Boards. While welcoming the

delegates to the All India Congress Committee meeting at Ahmedabad, Sardar Patel said, "Alongwith Non-cooperation, we could achieve considerable progress in the field of constructive activity...It is in the field of Harijan welfare that we could record significant progress. Their children are getting admissions in the schools and it is noteworthy that they are found equally intelligent as others. I won't say that getting admissions to their children is 100 percent achieved. It is true that at some places, separate schools for them had to be established... Untouchability is a mentality for changing which we will have to make great efforts. But certainly a change is taking place." In his regular writings in the *Young India*, Ganhdi used to harp on this subject. But his was not the lone voice. A number of leaders used to deal with this subject in their public addresses.

Dr. M.A.Ansari, in his presidential address delivered at 1927 Congress, had said, "We should continuously look after the Sikhs of the North, non-Brahmins in the South and depressed classes spread all over the country. Abolition of untouchability was the task mainly of the Hindus. It must be constantly kept in mind that the economic and political inability suffered by such a large number is the greatest stumbling block in achieving national Independence."

On Varnashram Dharma and Caste

There has been acrimonious debate about Gandhi's real position on caste system. Some dalit leaders feel that as he had once advocated the desirability of continuing varna system, his assertion that he stood for abolition of untouchability is not genuine, but smacks of hypocrisy.

It is true that Gandhi had, for some time, toyed with the idea of looking at varnadharm as a tool to fight the evil system of free

market and industrialization which was based on the inhuman principle of cut-throat competition. But, within a short period of seven years, he realized that that position of his was taken to be justifying the current caste system which was patently unjust and deserved to be discarded as soon as possible.

Here, attention may be drawn to one point of methodology. It was in his article in his weekly *Harjan*, dated 29-4-1933, that he had stated, "I would like to say to the diligent readers of my writings... that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth, I have discarded many ideas and learnt many things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment and therefore when anybody finds inconsistency, between any two writings of mine, and he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject."

Therefore it would be fair to look at his writings in chronological order and accept his views expressed in later writings as his final, or latest, position on that point.

In an article in *Young India* of 5-1-1921 he had stated, "From economic point of view, its (Varnadharma's) nature was once very great. It ensured hereditary skill. It limited competition. It was the best remedy against pauperism. And it had all the advantages of trade guilds. Although it did not foster adventure or invention there, it is not known to have come in its way. "Historically speaking caste may be regarded as man's experiment of social adjustment in the laboratory of Indian Society. If we can prove it to be a success, it can be offered to the world as a heaven and as the best remedy against competition and social disintegration born out of avarice and greed."

The point Gandhi has attempted to make in this writing is that caste system, as a system of division of labour with continuation of skill, is or can be useful as an alternative to the Western prototype of industrial civilization. It has been observed earlier in this book that Gandhi was deeply impressed by the critique of that civilization contained in the writings of great thinkers like Ruskin and Tolstoy. (In the parenthesis it may be noted that Gandhi failed to distinguish between industrial development and capitalism. In those days, he might not be aware of Marx's writings. Those became popular outside Europe only after the Russian revolution of 1917 was consolidated during the next 15-20 years.)

In India, as in many other countries outside Europe, there was great admiration for the affluent western civilization. Many were driven to ape it for the benefit of their respective countries. As a firm believer in the philosophy of simple living and high thinking, Gandhi was trying to find out desirable alternative to western civilization. In that context he felt that, since the Civilization of India continued for so long, say about three thousand years or so, it may have some inherent qualities and strength to withstand onslaughts.

It is evident from his style of running a common household like Phoenix Society or Tolstoy Farm in South Africa in the concluding years of the nineteenth century, that he did not believe in considering manual labour as degrading. On the contrary, he extolled it as a means to achieve physical and mental health. He also did not consider any productive activity as superior or inferior, nor did he believe in social immobility which is the distinguishing feature of caste system. In those communes, all were treated as equals in status and in the sharing of the produce of their labour.

In 1923, he wrote, "I feel the varnashram system based on birth was a sound system of division of labour. The present system of

caste is a perversion of the original idea. In my opinion, there was no hierarchy or superior-inferior type of discrimination in it. It is related wholly to the concept of duty. It is true that I had said varna was based on birth but I had also said that it is possible for a shudra to be a vaishya. It is not necessary to have a label for doing a particular work. One who does the work of a Brahmin will become Brahmin in next birth."

It is obvious that he is obdurate and wants to thrust his meaning on the traditional concepts. In his defence, it may be said that, in his anxiety to find an alternative to the vicious western civilization, he was trying to persuade the people to adopt new attitude while retaining the methods with which the people were accustomed.

In another article at about the same time, he said, "The vast organisation of caste answered not only the religious wants of the community but it answered its political needs. The villagers managed their internal affairs through the caste system, and through it they dealt with any oppression from the ruling power or powers. It is not possible to deny of a nation—that was capable of producing the caste system its wonderful power of organization"

One may agree that a kind of equilibrium was achieved by the caste system and maintained for so long. But that does not mean that it was a just order and be tolerated for ever.

These views of Gandhi came in for harsh criticism. Some of his close friends also argued with him. Finally, he had stated in unequivocal words that he does not support the caste system as it exists today. In an article in *Young India*, 4-6-1931, he wrote:

"I have frequently said that I do not believe in caste system in the modern sense. It is an excrescence and a handicap on progress. Nor do I believe in inequalities between human beings. We are all

absolutely equal. But equality is of souls and not bodies. Hence it is a mental state. We need to think of and assert equality because we see great inequalities in the physical world. We have to realize equality in the midst of this apparent inequality. Assumption of superiority by anyone person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste in so far as it connotes distinctions in status is an evil."

This position he maintained till the last.

It is apparent that he had undertaken the work of abolition of untouchability and empowerment of the dalits as a matter of honest and deep conviction. Or, to use his idiom, "God's work" There was no political motivation behind it.

Before embarking on a tour of the South, he addressed a public meeting at Wardha on 20 December 1933 in which he said, "Even if all Hindus in India come together to tell me that there is basis in all the holy shastras and scriptures for the custom of untouchability as it prevails today, I would say that all those shastras and scriptures are false." The orthodoxy was angry with Gandhi right from 1921 when he launched campaign for abolition of untouchability. Many a pundits used to meet him and argue about the sanctity of the scriptures and doctrine of sacramental purity. Gandhi would say, "Show me a dictum to that effect". And nobody could comply. Because it was not existent. Chaturvarnya system has been mentioned in the Rigved as having originated from the mouth of the Brahma. Brahmin is at the top of the ladder. Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra follow in ranking. But the shudras were not untouchables. The cultivating castes like kunabi etc were supposed to belong to that category. And the tradition does not hold them untouchables. It is mentioned in the Manusmriti, the book supposed to embody the law of the Hindus, that a Brahmin man can marry a Shudra woman also. The progeny would not be treated

as illegitimate. The only thing it mentions is that a son begot from a Brahmin wife would get half share in ancestral property while a son born of shudra wife would get only one-eighth. One may find it all very repulsive. But the fact remains that there is no evidence of untouchability in the scriptures.

Tilak, in his *Geeta Rahasya*, has mentioned existence of a fifth category, *pancham*, which might have been accommodated at a later date. Some scholars say that the victorious rulers might have treated the conquered people as 'untouchables' and in course of time, the custom might have become permanent and got the sanction of religious tradition. Whatever the origins, Gandhi was justified in calling himself an honest Hindu and yet say that observing untouchability was a sin against God.

The orthodox elements used to create obstructions in Gandhi's campaign for abolition of untouchability. During the decade from 1921 to 1933, there took place two murderous attempts on his life: one at Panchagani and another on the Mumbai-Pune road. He was manhandled at Varanasi and a number of places in the South.

But Gandhi stood firm.

On August 2, 1931, one temple was to allow entry to the dalits. Addressing the gathering that had assembled there, Gandhi said, "I do not consider the work of serving the untouchables as inferior. The work that I do for social reform is not secondary to political work. I turn to political work when I find that social work could not be done without the political..."

"Service to untouchables means redeeming debt which is centuries old, and to expiate, in some measure, the sin we have been guilty of for ages, viz. that of oppressing and insulting our

own kith and kin...

"Only the other day, a friend suggested to me that the word Harijan (man of God) be substituted for the word 'antyaaja' (the last born) that is being used for untouchables. It was used by the great saint Narsinha Mehta who, by and by, belonged to Nagar Brahmin community and who defied the whole community by claiming 'the untouchables' as his own. I am delighted to adopt that word."

A number of educated dalit leaders do not like that word. They feel it puts a gloss over the situation and gives sense of complacency to the upper caste people that all the plights of the dalits are over.

There is a genuine dilemma here. If the word 'untouchable' connotes derogation, why continue to use it? If it is widely agreed that the custom of untouchability is to be abolished, the term will have to be dropped sooner or later. Then why not sooner?

But the counter argument also contains sense. If nomenclature is changed, the problem would be pushed under the carpet.

It may be noted here that many dalit leaders also desired to drop the use of that word 'untouchable.' The dalit leaders of Kanpur (U. P.), way back in early 20th century, had adopted the name "Adi Hindu Sabha" for their association. Some in the South preferred the word "Adi Dravid". Even Dr. Ambedkar did not like the use of that word. He expressed displeasure even about the term 'depressed classes' used in the official papers. In a memorandum submitted to the Government in 1931, he suggested that they may be referred to as "Protestant Hindus". That was also not liked by many. There is no harm in substituting "dalit" for Harijan though it also carries a tinge. It may be noted that

many people living in far off places liked that word as an honorable term. A survey for medical purposes was conducted in the North-East in 1999. To the query "caste of the head of the family", twenty-five per cent of the households, who belonged to the SC category had replied as "Harijan" (p.424, Caste Class and Violence, Ed. Pravin Shah, cited in an article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 October 2003) However, the term used in the Government of India Act, 1935, is quite suitable and non-controversial. Therein it is mentioned that a reservation will be provided in Government recruitment for the persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes i.e. the castes included in an annexure. The same term has been adopted in our Constitution. Gandhi was categorical about the code of conduct to be observed by the members of the Congress. At his instance, a circular was issued saying that Congress member should never indulge in discrimination to the dalit in matters of food and social intercourse.

Simon Commission and Nehru Report

During the twenties of the last century, the country was passing through bad times. Due to slowing down of demand for war material, large number of workers were thrown out of employment. Since American cotton started flowing to England, there was slump in demand for Indian cotton. The farmers were put in difficulties. Congress leaders were trying to help toiling masses to steer clear of the difficulties. In the Muslim world, Khilafat movement suffered a severe blow. In Turkey, Kemal Ataturk had seized power and disbanded the office of Khalifa for ever. Participants in the Khilafat movement suffered great heart-burning. Some mischief-mongers ignited communal riots. As a reaction, there came to be founded in 1925 an organization, called Rashtriya Swayanssewak Sangh, (R.S.S.) which was wedded to the aim of establishing Hindu Raj. Cleavage between the two communities was widening.

Right-thinking Muslim leaders started realizing that no betterment of their community took place as a result of the separate electorate. It proved to be a mirage. Worse still, it fuelled enmity with the Hindus with whom they had to live.

Playing musical instruments by the Hindu processions in front of the mosques used to be the recurring cause of conflict. In one case, the law-court had given a verdict that Muslims had no legal right to object to playing on the thorough-fare to passing by a mosque. Some leaders, with a view to patch up with the Hindus, in 1926, submitted a draft appeal to Congress leaders which they wanted political leaders of various hues to jointly issue to the press. Therein, it was stated that "it is true that the Hindus have a right to play music while passing on a thorough-fare beside a mosque. But, in deference to the feelings of their Muslim brethren whose namaz was likely to be disturbed, we appeal the Hindu brothers to desist from doing so." The Congress leaders, on their part, approached leaders of different political groups and sects. Barring R.S.S, almost all major parties and sects signed the appeal and issued it to the press.

A meeting was held at Delhi on 20 March 1927 in which a number of Muslim leaders had participated. There was unanimity of views that the separate electorates did not help ameliorate the hardships faced by the community. Instead, it led to the feeling that "you look after your problems; we do so for ourselves." Political life in every town and village got fractured. A resolution was passed saying that the separate electorates be cancelled if thirty per cent of the seats in the legislature were reserved for the Muslims and (1) The Sind province be carved out of the then Bombay Province (Muslims were in substantial majority in Sind) (2) North-West Frontier and Baluchistan be given status on par with other provinces (3) Reserved seats be provided for the Muslims in their proportion to population in the provincial

assemblies of Punjab and Bengal. The Congress Working Committee meeting held on 15-18 May 1927 passed a resolution expressing general agreement with those suggestions. It was since 1920 that the Congress was pleading for reorganization of provinces on linguistic basis.

This showed that the damage caused to the unity of the Indian people was getting repaired. That sent tremors to the seat of power in Delhi and London.

Before continuing further, the terms, separate and reserved constituencies, may be explained. In a democratic set-up a country is divided in small territorial constituencies so that administrative arrangements for conducting elections are facilitated. Overall principle to be followed is that every constituency may have equal number of population. For example if a country has ten crore population and the legislative assembly has two hundred members, then the norm is fixed as five lakhs (10 percent plus/minus) per constituency. Territorial constituencies are demarcated accordingly. Each constituency is to elect one member and all the voters residing and enrolled in that constituency are entitled to vote to any of the candidates contesting from it. Any voter, irrespective of his/her religion or caste, may contest. This is the general arrangement.

Separate electorate for Muslims means that a territorial constituency is divided in two-one exclusive for Muslim and another, general. Muslim voters in every village and town in that constituency will vote only for a candidate who would be Muslim. And non-Muslim voter in every village and town in the same constituency will vote to non-Muslim candidate. Muslim candidate would meet only Muslim voters in every village/town and so on. Consequently, each village and town gets divided on the communal lines.

In case of a reserved constituency, all voters, irrespective of caste or religion are entitled to vote to any of the candidates who all would be from the same category for which the constituency is reserved. So there is no division amongst the voters on the basis of community or caste.

The rationale behind the policy of reservation of seats is that election being an highly competitive venture, persons belonging to socially, educationally and economically weaker sections may find it very difficult to contest election. But the legislature must contain members from every section of society to make it genuinely representative. So, a few seats equal to that of a section's proportion in population are declared reserved meaning thereby that candidates from that section can alone contest from those constituencies. This kind of arrangement avoids separation of voters in the constituency. In our Constitution such reservation is provided for SC and ST for Lok Sabha and state Vidhan Sabhas. It may also be pointed out that elected representatives, either on general or separate or reserved seats enjoy no special powers, either legislative or executive.

In a legislative assembly a resolution can be passed if a majority of the members vote for it. It is collective power for the whole body. Individual member has none of the kind. The only advantage entailed is that persons belonging to backward castes can get opportunity to express their views and present the problems of their castes. Well, this is by way of digression.

The rulers in the middle of the decade 1920-30 started perceiving increasing popular dissatisfaction towards them while rapprochement between the two main communities was gathering momentum. The Viceroy called Gandhi and told him that the Government in England were thinking of appointing

a commission to study the political situation in India and recommend reforms. There was expectancy that the matter would be debated publicly. Or at least elected representatives would be consulted before taking formal decision. But, all of a sudden, His Majesty's Government announced appointment of Simon Commission which was all "white". No Indian was included as if nobody was qualified enough. That enraged the people.

The Congress declared that it would boycott the proceedings of the Commission and initiate parallel process of drafting Constitution for the nation. Young socialist leader of Mumbai Yusuf Meherally coined the slogan, "Simon, Go Back" A spirited demonstration was staged in front of the docks when the Commission members landed on Indian soil. Similar, demonstrations were organised at a number of places in the country.

The British had shrewdly initiated a process of weaning minorities away from the Congress. Vague allurements were aired. A little earlier, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a learned lawyer from Mumbai, who had suffered inhuman treatment at the hands of the caste Hindus at various places including Vadodara (whose ruler, Sayajirao Gaikwad, had helped him get education in England) was nominated as a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly. He had organized a satyagraha at Mahad in 1927, for drinking water from a public tank. There, the orthodox Hindus had opposed the move and dealt violent blows to the dalits who had gathered there in large numbers. Ambedkar felt that the Hindus would never give human, let alone political, rights to the dalits. Dr. Ambedkar welcomed the appointment of Simon Commission and congratulated the British for keeping it all "white" saying that "the dalits would receive some rights only from their hands" (Writings and

Speeches by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Vol. III, Government of Maharashtra, p. 420). The Commission, on their part, got Ambedkar associated with its work. "Dr. Ambedkar along with some dalit leaders from the South submitted a memorandum to the Commission. It contained a demand for adult franchise. While giving oral evidence before the Commission, he argued that if a dalit man and woman gets a right to vote, it can be used as a great lever for obliterating injustices thrust on them. A member asked, "Do you not ask for separate electorate for the depressed classes?" To that Ambedkar replied, "If adult franchise is granted, that would be enough." "And if that is not granted? "Then we will have to ask for separate electorate," replied Ambedkar.

Besides boycotting the Simon Commission, the Congress had initiated a process of preparing Constitution for free India. It convened an All Parties Conference at Delhi on 12-22 February 1928 to which were invited the following: 1. National Liberation Front. 2. Hindu Maha Sabha. 3. All India Muslim League 4. Central Khilafat Committee. 5. Central Sikh League. 6. South Indian Liberal Federation. 7. All India Trade Union Congress. 8. General Council of all Burmese Associations. 9. Home Rule League. 10. Republican League. 11. Independent Party in Assembly. 12. Nationalist Party in the Assembly. 13. Indian States Subjects Association. 14. Indian States' Subjects Conference. 15. Indian States' Peoples' Conference. 16. Anglo Indian Association 17. Indian Association of Calcutta. 18. Parsee Central Association. 19. Zoroastrian Association. 20. Parsee Rajakiya Sabha. 21. Parsee Panchayat. 22. All India Conference of Indian Christians. 23. Southern India Chamber of Commerce. 24. Dravid Mahajan Sabha. 25. Landlords' Association-Avadh-Agra Bihar, Bengal, and Madras. Also the following parties in Bombay province - Non-Brahmin Party, Nationalist Non-Brahmin Party, Communist Party, Mumbai

and Mumbai Workers and Peasants Party. The Second meeting on 19-5-1928, elected the following as drafting committee. Motilal Nehru (President). 2 Tej Bahadur Sapru. 3 Sir Ali Imam. 4. Govindrao Pradhan. 5. Shueb Qureshi. 6. Subhash Chandra Bose. 7. Madhavrao Aney. 8. M. R. Jayakar. 9. N.M.Joshi and 10. Sardar Mangal Singh.

After holding twenty-five meetings, the Committee prepared its report and released it in July, 1928. Important points therein were as follows:

1. Reorganisation of the provinces based on language be effected. The Congress has been advocating it since 1920 and the people, by and large, were supporting it.
- Similar demands were made from, Sindh, Assam, Orissa, Karnataka, Andhra, etc.
2. Responsible form of government be adopted. The executive should be responsible to the legislature and legislature to the voters.

- 3 Sindh be carved out as separate province. NWFP and Baluchistan be accorded status equal to other provinces. In the Central Legislature, Muslims to be given representation in proportion to their population and not 30 percent.
4. Every man/woman above 18 years of age be given right to vote in the elections to the central and provincial legislatures.

- 5 Fundamental rights of citizens, viz, to safeguard life, liberty and property, to move freely in the country and to use public thoroughfares, right to freedom of speech and expression, freedom of faith and worship, to engage in any occupation, of one's choice, etc be recognized and safeguarded by the state.

6. In public life, equal treatment be meted out to men and women, and there should be no discrimination, on the basis of religion, caste, creed, gender, etc.
7. Separate lists of the Central and State subjects be included in the Constitution..
8. Due protection be given to the minorities.

The report of the All Parties Conference was titled as "Anti-separatist Manifesto". The, system of separate electorate was discarded after detailed discussion. It was recommended that the state should provide for education of the depressed classes and efforts must be made to ameliorate their age-old handicaps.

Support to the report was manifested by the people. Dr. Ambedkar had written a long article on this report. In it, he observed that the Nehru Committee need not have taken the trouble of drafting such elaborate report. The Government Of India Act, 1919 could have been taken as the basis and necessary changes or amendments be suggested.

He further said that the most objectionable provision in that Act of 1919 is about the separate electorate for the Muslims and thirty per cent seats for Muslims in the Central Council.

He welcomed the position taken by the Nehru Committee on that. In the article, further, he criticized the provisions about Sind etc in the following words "By recommending the carving out of the Sind province, the committee has done injustice to the Hindus there. This shows that the committee had acceded to the demands of the Muslims made at their Delhi meeting of 20 March 1927" (*Bahishkrit Bharat* January 1, 1929)

This was too much. How can it be called an injustice just

because the Hindus are a minority in that province? It is a fact that in India in some provinces Muslims are a minority and in a few provinces the Hindus are so. What harm is there? This has been so for centuries together. This comment of Dr. Ambedkar was most unfair. Simon Commission completed their work and submitted their report for Bombay province on 17 May 1929. They had recommended, not separate electorate but reserved seats for the depressed classes in the Provincial Council of Bombay Province.

Dr Ambedkar met the Commission and submitted a short note in which it was suggested that the Muslims should not ask for separate seats and if they did, the Govt should not grant it. He added, "India is not the only country with a Muslim minority. In countries like Bulgaria, Greece, Rumania, Yugoslavia, Russia etc, there are Muslim minorities; but nowhere are provided separate seats for them" (*Bahishkriti Bharat*, January 1, 1929)

Veravada Pact

Simon Commission also proved to be a damp squib. Congress leaders knew it too well that mere memoranda or petitions would not fetch political rights for the Indians. Annual session of the Congress was to be held at Lahore by the end of the year. Young leader Jawaharlal Nehru was elected its President. Youths of the country were greatly enthused. Sensing trouble, Viceroy Lord Irwin stated that His Majesty's Government were contemplating to convene a Round Table Conference in London shortly. In a speech on 31st October 1929, he stated "Many doubts are being expressed, both in England and India, about the real purpose behind the Government of India Act, 1919. I am instructed to explain that, it is to establish Home Rule type of structure in India." This

was for the first time that the term "Dominion Status" was used by the rulers. Under the British Empire, there were two types - a colony and a Dominion Status. For a colony, all control was vested in the Government in England while, under Dominion Status "day-to-day" administration was entrusted to the elected representatives there.

To take cognizance of Irwin speech, prominent leaders met at Delhi and discussed the matter. A resolution was drafted by Gandhi and sent to the Government. In the meanwhile, there was raised a hue and cry in England over that speech, presumably by the Conservative Party quarters. The Prime Minister had to clarify in the British Parliament that their policy was not changed. In India, Congress leaders met the Viceroy on 23 December 1929. At that time there were many Congressmen languishing in jails. After greeting the leaders, Irwin enquired "How do we start? Shall we take the issue of release of prisoners first?" He must be under the impression that the leaders were anxious about the matter. For some time, there was silence which was broken by Gandhi who asked, "What about Home Rule?" Irwin remained silent; and the meeting was over.

The Congress session at Lahore on 30th December was massive. In his presidential speech, Jawaharlal Nehru said "Complete independence, totally free from the British, is our aim". There were thunderous clapping and deafening slogan-shouting. In a resolution moved by Gandhi, countrymen were asked to engage in constructive activities while the Working Committee was authorized to chalk out a programme of agitation.

The agitation was started in 1930. More than 80,000 men and women courted arrest. Trying to ignore all that, the British

Government convened a Round Table Conference (RTC) at London in November 1930. Leaders of various minorities and political parties were invited. Even the representatives of the Chamber of Princes were invited. How were they concerned with the political reforms for Indian commonality, when the princes in their turn were ruling in a traditional feudal manner? Noteworthy was the speech by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Participating in the plenary session of the RTC on November 20, 1930, he said, "There has been a unique relationship of the depressed classes of India with the British. The former feel that they would liberate the depressed classes from the centuries' old tyrannical clutches of the orthodox Hindus. That is why they fought bravely against the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh (kings) and won Indian empire for the British. The British also undertook to serve as the trustees of the D.C. Before the arrival of the British, the conditions of the depressed classes were deplorable. Has there been any change in it? No... We are being denied entry into the army and the police. About a century and a half have passed and our wounds are still bleeding. And they have done nothing... it seems they are not able to do anything. It seems, all that will have to be done ourselves; but for that we need political power" (Writings and Speeches by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Vol. III, Government of Maharashtra, p.504). "We are not interested in the juggle of words like Dominion Status or complete independence. We feel that those who would hold political power after winning independence would oppress us... In the past, when political rights were given, the depressed classes were totally neglected... We have no friends. The rulers are using us for retaining power. The Hindus call as theirs only to exploit us. The Muslims feel that if they extend support to us, their share would be reduced... those who have occupied seats of power at the provinces are tyrannizing us. We feel that the Centre should restrain them. That is why we want unitary form of

government".(ibid,p.507).

The Congress was not invited to the RTC. They were engaged in struggle. Taking note of the fact that they were being labeled as Hindu organisation, by the rulers on one side and by the dalits and Muslims on the other, the Congress adopted a resolution at Karachi session in which the aims and objectives of Swaraj were elaborately spelt. In the preamble was said "Putting a stop to the exploitation of the starving multitude is the meaning of our Swaraj." It reiterated the fundamental rights contained in the Nehru report. In addition it was asserted that the State would be neutral in religious matters and there would be free, compulsory education for all. While rebutting the charge leveled by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries (FICCI) that the majority rule would be a Hindu rule, Gandhi said that it would be the rule of all Indians... no one community would be able to monopolise power. The Congress desires to represent all... Our nationalism will not be offending to anybody, and we will not be exploited". Love the Daridra Narayan was his message.

The first RTC ended without any fruitful result. The British realized that no serious business would be transacted without the participation of the Congress. So an invitation was sent to it. The Congress leaders were skeptical. Would the issue of Home Rule be discussed? Gandhi had an apprehension that the British would play one community against the other and then would say that unless they arrive at a definite arrangement, no further discussion could take place. The A.I.C.C. adopted a resolution, on 6 August 1931, saying that Gandhi would go to London RTC as their sole representative. While on the voyage in an interview given to Reuters, Gandhi said that "even though the British are calling me a Hindu, I am going there as

Bharatiya (Indian) and not as Hindu. I shall be striving for such India which the poor would feel that it is their nation. There would be none superior or inferior, where all the communities would live together and love each other. Untouchability will have no place there. Intoxicating drinks and drugs would be prohibited."

Work of the second RTC commenced in September, 1931. Committees were formed for the subjects like federal structure, method of election of representatives, minorities, public accounts, etc. Ambedkar was quite active, working on a number of committees. Rounds of exchanges were taking place in a congenial atmosphere. But Gandhi sensed that hectic behind-the-scenes activities were going on. There was a move to involve the princes in federation, giving them representation and even creating third chamber for them, but the official delegates did not say so openly.

The Prime Minister of England had assumed the chairmanship of the committee on minorities. On 8 October 1931, while participating in the open session, Gandhi said that "the efforts of arriving at agreed formula failed. In my opinion, the reason may be found in the way the delegates to this RTC were chosen. They are not elected by respective communities... I fail to understand why the meeting of the committee for minorities has been convened at the very start of the proceedings. We do not know what we are going to get. Agreement about the minorities can be the culmination of Swaraj and not its foundation... in my opinion, foreign rule is one of the reasons of hardening positions..." That evoked sharp reactions. Ambedkar paid in the same coin. On different occasions, Gandhi stated, "it is being said that I am opposed to the Depressed Classes entering the legislatures. This is false... I am opposed to creating separate electorates for them. They

would cause harm to them also. Congress is bound to the principle of adult franchise. Let lakhs of dalit men and women be enrolled as voters. Some of them would be certainly elected... They need protection from social and religious tortures. Customs are more powerful than law. It is true that Hindus are responsible for their plight. It is good that they(Hindus) are now realizing it. Let law be passed to punish those of the upper castes who torture the depressed classes." Ambedkar said," the claim of Gandhi that Congress represents depressed classes is false and unwarranted...I wish to tell the Prime Minister that the depressed classes are not hungry for power. It is true that I am not agitating for transfer of power... I am also aware that I cannot prevent it if it is going to take place... But I do want to say that if the power is going to be transferred then it should not be handed over to any one community, neither Hindu nor Muslim. Before the transfer of power takes place, arrangement must be made so that power will be shared by all communities in proportion to their population. To that Gandhi said," Claims made by other minorities are understandable. But that being done so by the depressed classes is not understandable. Asking permanent separate electorate for them is to create permanent barriers. Let the Sikhs remain so for ever. So also the Muslims or the Europeans. But should the untouchables remain so for ever? Let this gathering and the whole world know that there is a group of social reformers in India who feel that untouchability is a blot, not on them, but on us and that they are doing their best to obliterate it. We wish that nobody be entered in our records or in the census as 'untouchable'. I would say that let Hindu religion die if untouchability persists. I note with sorrow that those who ask for such political rights for the untouchables, are not aware of the realities of political and social functioning in India. Even if I am left alone, even then I will oppose separate electorate for the untouchables."

Things in different directions were moving fast. 'A joint representation was presented to the Prime Minister, on behalf of Muslims, Depressed Classes, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans which contained eleven points like provisions be made so that the minorities can enjoy their rights, separate electorate be created so that they get representation in the legislature, etc. Additional petition by the depressed classes, contained additional demands for entry in the army and police and right to appeal to the Governor-General in case of any injustice. The Anglo-Indians asked for such jobs as would enable them to maintain their standard of living. The Europeans asked for a provision that in case of a trial of an European, only Europeans be appointed on the jury. While concluding, the Prime Minister said that since there is no agreement about the minorities, he would give final verdict later.

On his return to India, Gandhi was arrested and sent to Yeravada prison. After about two months and a half, i.e. on 11 March 1932, Gandhi from Yeravada jail sent a letter to the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald reiterating that he would oppose a provision of separate electorate for the depressed classes if it would be included in his award.

It was on 17th August 1932 that the Prime Minister's Award, generally known as Communal Award, was announced. It did contain provision for separate electorate for the depressed classes. On 20 August, Gandhi sent a letter to the Prime Minister beseeching him to reconsider the matter or else he would start 'fast unto death' from 20th September. When the news broke out it caused great stir. Many prominent persons from different walks of life tried to persuade Ambedkar to give up his demand for the separate electorate and agree to reserved seats as suggested by Gandhi. A few untoward scenes took

place with a view to intimidate Ambedkar. Senior leaders restrained such overenthusiasts. Instead, collective prayers were offered in various places of worship. At a few places, doors of temples were thrown open to the dalits.

Ambedkar stated that he could not mortgage the interests of the down-trodden people for saving life of an individual, howsoever great he may be. The Prime Minister sent his reply that Gandhi's request could not be accepted. Thereafter Gandhi started his fast on September 20, 1932. Madan Mohan Malviya rushed to Mumbai and held parleys with various leaders. On 23rd September a formula was evolved in which it was stated that the 'separate' be substituted by 'reserved'. In the Prime Minister's Award, no seat in the Central Council to depressed classes was given and in all 73 seats were given in different provincial councils. In the formula of 23rd September 148 seats in different provincial councils were agreed to be made 'reserved' and also a few in the Central Council for the depressed classes. The formula also contained a recommendation that, in the government jobs, reservation for that category be made.

Ambedkar and a few dalit leaders from the South, after long deliberations, gave their assent to that formula. The agreed formula was sent, through official channels, to the Prime Minister in London. His readiness to modify the Award as per the agreed formula, was conveyed on 25th September. Next day, i.e. on 26 September 1932, a conference took place in the premises of Yeravada Prison at Pune where Ambedkar and other dalit leaders were also present. Gandhi drafted a resolution and placed it before the Conference that was passed unanimously. The resolution read as follows; "The Conference resolves that henceforth, amongst the Hindus, no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by the reason of his birth, and those

who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same rights as Hindus as regards use of public wells, public schools, public roads and other public institutions. This right will have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest acts of the Swaraj parliament, if it shall not have received such recognition before, efforts will be made to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by custom upon the so-called untouchable classes, including the bar in respect of admission to temples." Thereafter, Gandhi ended his fast at 5.15 p.m.

In a statement to the press he said, "I am the same to the Muslims today that I was in 1920-22. I should be as prepared to lay down my life as I was in Delhi to achieve organic unity and permanent peace between them and the Hindus, and I hope there will be, as a result of this upheaval, a spontaneous move in this direction, and then, certain other communities no longer stand out." (p. 174, *The Mahatma*, Vol III).

Thus ended the epoch-making chapter in the history of modern India.

One question, raised by many, including some dalits, is: why did Gandhi not oppose the separate electorate for the Muslims?

In the first place, it is to be noted that at the time when the British granted separate electorate for the Muslims, i.e. in 1906, Gandhi was not in India; as he was far away in South Africa. That provision was made statutory in the Indian Councils Act, 1909. Gandhi arrived in India in 1915 and was quite junior in the Congress organization. Tilak, for whom Gandhi had highest regard, had taken initiative for getting it endorsed by the

Lucknow Congress. Gandhi emerged as great leader after 1920. As things proceeded, there had been discussions at various levels in which Gandhi, like so many others, did point out the evil effects of that arrangement on the body politic, including the Muslims themselves. As is evident from the resolution passed at the meeting of Muslim leaders at Delhi in 1927, which expressly stated that they were prepared to do away with the separate electorate. The All Parties' Conference of 1928 which had full endorsement of Gandhi, had unequivocally discarded that principle. Its title, "Anti-Separatist Manifesto" is emphatic enough. Most important point to keep in mind is that the British, who were the third party but wielding imperial power, were encouraging divisive forces. Gandhi said so in the presence of the British Prime Minister at the RTC.

When the opportunity rose for the Indians to draft Constitution for their country, as a result of the announcement of the British decision to transfer power in India the matter was decided for ever. No separate electorate for any community or caste. Only reserved seats for the socially and educationally weaker sections of society have been provided in the constitution.

Actually, an unsolved riddle of the whole episode is: why Ambedkar, who had opposed separate electorate again and again, from the days of Southborough Committee in 1919, of the Simon Commission of 1927, till the first RTC, did ask for it at the second RTC? Nobody would level allegation of any underhand dealing. One may say that the pressure of his colleagues and dalit leaders from far of places like South or U.P. might have forced him to take that position. That is understandable.

In conclusion, it may be stated that it is not proper to label

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Gandhi as 'anti-dalit'. His contribution to the cause of abolishing untouchability is unassailable. He aroused conscience of the upper castes and persuaded them to give up that wicked custom.

Secondly, he devoted considerable energy for promoting programmes of empowerment of the dalits as also other poor and down-trodden sections. He inspired thousands of men and women to engage in those activities. His emphasis on self-reliance and voluntary efforts for eradication of social evils as also for implementation of development programmes is relevant even today.

He founded Harijan Sewak Sangh in 1933 which has been running hostels for backward classes. Gandhi had taken a vow that he would not attend a marriage in which one of the parties was not Harijan. And he observed it till the last.

In conclusion, it may be observed that the works of the two great leaders, Ambedkar and Gandhi, were complementary. Ambedkar inspired the Dalits to fight for their legitimate rights. 'Educate, organize, agitate' was his message. Gandhi's was not anyway different.

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