

AMBEDKAR AND POLITICAL RESERVATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

In an interview to this paper, Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of B R Ambedkar, (IE, July 27) said, “Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had envisaged reservation for SC/STs in Lok Sabha and state Assembly constituencies for just 10 years.” This is an erroneous interpretation and shows lack of understanding of Ambedkar’s ideology and his idea of political representation initiated 100 years ago, in 1919.

In the run up for political representation of the oppressed millions of untouchables in India, Ambedkar’s efforts, along with those of the nominated untouchable members of the legislative councils in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta Presidencies, bore fruit in the 1920s. The colonial state was forced to nominate two members from among untouchables to the Round Table Conference in 1930 to state their position in the constitutional process which eventually led to the framing of the Government of India Act, 1935.

Ambedkar and his colleague from Madras, Rettamalai Srinivasan, were able to convince the first Round Table deliberations in 1930 to accept elected representation through reserved seats and separate electorate method. When [Mahatma Gandhi](#) attended the second Round Table Conference in 1931, he initially opposed any representation by electoral process for the untouchables and later opposed the method of election, separate electorate (which was available to Muslims and other minorities).

Gandhi’s opposition to the idea of separate electorate was that untouchables are an intrinsic part of the Hindu society. Gandhi’s fast unto death in 1932 resulted in a settlement between Hindus and untouchables called the Poona Pact. The Pact created reserved seats from among the general seats to untouchables and altered method of election from separate electorates to a two-round election process. The Poona Pact needs a re-reading to understand its misinterpretation by Prakash Ambedkar. Its clause 6 reads: “The system of representation of Depressed Classes by reserved seats in the Provincial and Central Legislatures (as provided for in clauses (1) and (4)) shall continue until determined otherwise by mutual agreement between the communities concerned in this settlement.”

“Mutual agreement” is the golden rule that governs the extension of reserved seats for untouchables even till now. That is why the reserved seats have continued even after 70 years of India’s Constitution. The method of election to these reserved seats, whether by separate electorate or joint electorate or qualified joint electorate or territorial separate electorate, became a point of attrition between Ambedkar and Gandhi and later, between Ambedkar and Sardar Patel in 1946.

The election results to provincial assemblies in 1937 under the Poona Pact design were analysed by Ambedkar in his book *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done To Untouchables* in 1945 and castigated Gandhi for creating slaves of the elected representatives of untouchables. Ambedkar’s solution to this “slavery” was to return to his idea of separate electorate. He claimed the same in his March, 1947 representation to the Constituent Assembly, *The States and Minorities*. Ambedkar suggested the initial 25 years of reserved seats and any extension (or otherwise) after 25 years should have the approval of two-thirds of members of Parliament and also two-thirds of scheduled castes members (elected through separate electorate method).

With the arrival of Constituent Assembly, Sardar Patel effectively blocked the idea of separate

electorate as a method in the Constituent Assembly proceedings. After the Partition of India and Gandhi's assassination, Sardar Patel, in December 1948, moved the idea to abolish all the reserved seats in political representation, even though the Constituent Assembly had initially approved it in August 1947. Ambedkar opposed the abolition of reserved seats and threatened to walk out of the Constituent Assembly. After a stalemate of six months, in May 1949, Sardar Patel had to accept the continuation of reserved seats for Scheduled Castes. The clause that was binding on the Constituent Assembly as per its proceedings is "Provided that reservation shall be for ten years and the position would be reconsidered at the end of the period".

When Patel moved the amended Report, which abolished reservations for all minorities except those of Scheduled Castes in the Constituent Assembly on 25 May 1949 and on the next day when the resolution was approved, Ambedkar did not attend the Constituent Assembly. [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) was present. It was the Clause 6 of Poona Pact and the Constituent Assembly Report of August 1947 amended by the May 1949 Report, that holds good on the idea of 10 years or more as a mutually agreed settlement. Dissatisfied with the 10 years clause, Ambedkar suggested other methods such as multi-member constituencies with cumulative vote in 1955, before his death in 1956. This in no way alters Ambedkar's core idea of representation, which was reserved seats with separate electorates for untouchables and its extension based on mutual agreement. He last stated this in *The States and Minorities*. The reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Tribes were extended for another 10 years till 2030, unanimously by Parliament in December 2019.

The contention of Ambedkar's grandson that, "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had envisaged reservation for ... just 10 years" is erroneous. Ambedkar's idea of nation, equality, democracy, his constitutional values and ideology his unrelenting support for women's rights have, over the years, found resonance in the entire country. The Ambedkarite movement and constitutional values drive millions of Dalits and youth who want an equitable society. It is not clear whether Prakash Ambedkar was speaking for his party (the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi) or interpreting Ambedkar. Unfortunately for the legal heirs of Ambedkar, the interpretation of Ambedkarite ideas have moved beyond their canvas.

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