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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ELECTED BY WHOM? AMBEDKAR, SEPARATE ELECTORATES, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF GROUP AUTHORIZATION

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Abstract

B. R. Ambedkar spent more than a decade arguing for separate electorates for the Depressed Classes. He won them in the Communal Award of 1932, lost them within weeks to Gandhi's fast and the Poona Pact, and attacked the reserved-seat system that replaced them for years afterward. Yet in the Constituent Assembly in 1949 he accepted joint electorates and the abolition of separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes. Read as a change of position on the electoral form, this sequence looks like a reverse, a pragmatic compromise, or a change of mind. His electoral writings — the 1930 memorandum to the Round Table Conference, the analysis of the 1937 election returns in *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, and his interventions in the Constituent Assembly — suggest that the change was one of instrument rather than of principle. His objection to the joint electorate in the Poona Pact period was not to the form alone, but to an arrangement in which the representatives of the Scheduled Castes were chosen by the caste-Hindu majority rather than by the Scheduled Castes themselves. Separate electorates were the device he judged best able to secure representation of that kind under a restricted franchise, and the 1930 memorandum had already made joint electorates acceptable provided they were accompanied by adult suffrage. When universal franchise arrived and separate electorates were no longer available, he accepted a joint electorate while holding to the same commitment. His demand for separate electorates, his critique of the Poona Pact, and his acceptance of the 1949 settlement form a continuous position rather than a reversal.

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Introduction:-

Between 1919 and 1932, no demand was more central to Ambedkar's public life than the demand that the Depressed Classes elect their own representatives. He pressed it before the Southborough Committee on the franchise, restated it before the Simon Commission, and carried it to the Round Table Conferences in London, where he won the argument. The Communal Award of August 1932 granted the Depressed Classes separate electorates: a fixed number of seats to be filled by voters drawn only from among the Depressed Classes themselves. Within weeks this

achievement was effectively undone. Gandhi, in Yerwada jail, began a fast unto death against the Award, and Ambedkar, faced with the prospect of Gandhi dying and the retaliation that would follow against a community already at the mercy of caste-Hindu neighbours, signed the Poona Pact of September 1932. The Pact swept away separate electorates and put in their place reserved seats inside the general, joint electorate. For the next fifteen years Ambedkar treated the exchange as a loss, and his 1945 book on Congress and Gandhi is in large part a sustained account of what the joint electorate had done to the political standing of the Scheduled Castes.

In 1949, as chairman of the Drafting Committee, Ambedkar accepted the Constituent Assembly's decision to abolish separate electorates altogether and to protect the Scheduled Castes through reserved seats within joint electorates. The figure who had gone to London to win separate electorates, and who had spent a decade objecting to their loss, now presided over the settlement that ended them.

The sequence invites three natural interpretations. One treats the 1949 acceptance as a defeat that Ambedkar absorbed and made the best of: the votes were not there, separate electorates had been tainted by their association with Partition, and a shrewd politician cut his losses. A second treats it as pragmatism of a more principled kind — a maximal demand traded for a workable package of safeguards, on the judgment that a reserved seat in hand was worth more than a separate electorate that would never be granted. A third, less often stated outright but frequently implied, treats it as a change of view: the Ambedkar of the Constituent Assembly had come to see that separate electorates carried the costs Gandhi had warned of, and had moved away from the position of his younger self.

Each interpretation captures something real. Ambedkar did sign the Poona Pact under duress; he was a pragmatic bargainer; and separate electorates had become politically untenable by the late 1940s. But all three assume that his commitment was to separate electorates, so that surrendering them is what has to be explained — as loss, as trade, or as growth. His electoral writings support a different assumption. What Ambedkar was committed to was not separate electorates as such, but a principle governing who may legitimately choose the representatives of a subordinated group: that they must be chosen by that group and answerable to it, not installed by the majority that dominates it. Separate electorates were the instrument he judged best suited to securing that principle. Once instrument and principle are distinguished, the 1949 acceptance appears not as a reversal but as the adoption of a second-best instrument at a moment when the conditions governing the choice of instrument had changed.

This reading treats Ambedkar's electoral writings as occasional interventions rather than as parts of a system worked out in advance. Rodrigues (2002) has cautioned against reading his corpus as a doctrine unfolding toward a fixed end, and what follows recovers a principle recurring across these writings rather than one Ambedkar sat down to compose. The sequence of events is the place to begin, since the interpretive problem turns on its details.

Historical Development of Ambedkar's Electoral Position:

The demand for separate representation was, from the beginning, a demand about the untrustworthiness of the caste-Hindu majority as a representative of the Depressed Classes. In his evidence to the Southborough Committee in 1919, Ambedkar argued that the Depressed Classes could not be represented by others and needed the means to return men of their own choosing; the point was not cultural distinctiveness but the plain fact that those with an interest in maintaining the disabilities of the Untouchables could not be relied on to speak for them (Jaffrelot, 2005). The argument matured at the Round Table Conferences, where Ambedkar sought for the Depressed Classes the kind of separate electorate already conceded to Muslims. His formulation of the demand treated the electoral mechanism as conditional rather than fixed. In the memorandum he submitted with Rao Bahadur R. Srinivasan to the Minorities Sub-Committee in 1930, the primary claim concerned authorship: the Depressed Classes must have the "right to elect their own men as their representatives." Separate electorates were requested only "for the first ten years," to be followed "thereafter by joint electorates and reserved seats," and the memorandum stipulated that "joint electorates shall not be forced upon the Depressed Classes against their will unless such joint electorates are accompanied by adult suffrage" (Ambedkar & Srinivasan, 1930/2014). Separate electorates, on this formulation, were not the permanent form of Depressed Class representation but the safeguard required while the franchise remained narrow; adult suffrage was the condition under which Ambedkar was prepared to accept joint electorates in their place. The Communal Award of 1932 accepted the case, giving the Depressed Classes a set of reserved seats to be filled by separate Depressed Class electorates, alongside the ordinary right to vote in general constituencies, for a period of twenty years (Zelliot, 2013).

Gandhi's response in this case is well known and he regarded separate electorates for the Depressed Classes as a knife aimed at the heart of Hinduism, a device that would wall the Untouchables off from the Hindu fold

permanently, and he began his fast to force their withdrawal. The Poona Pact that ended the fast was, in form, a compromise: the Depressed Classes kept, and even enlarged, their bloc of reserved seats, but those seats would now be filled within the general electorate rather than by a separate one. A system of primary elections was written in to soften the change — Depressed Class voters would first choose, in a primary confined to themselves, a panel of candidates for each reserved seat, from which the general electorate would elect one member, an arrangement to run for ten years unless ended sooner by agreement (Jaffrelot, 2005). On paper this preserved a measure of Depressed Class choice. In practice, as Ambedkar would insist, the decisive vote — the one that actually returned a member — belonged to the joint electorate, in which the caste Hindus were the overwhelming majority. The Pact thus imposed joint electorates under precisely the circumstance his 1930 memorandum had refused: without the accompaniment of adult suffrage. What it removed was not only a preferred form but the condition he had attached to accepting the alternative.

Ambedkar left a detailed record of why he objected to the Poona Pact settlement, and that record bears on how the later acceptance should be read. His objection was not to the joint electorate as a form but to what the joint electorate did to the source of a representative's mandate. Establishing this requires attention to the reasons he gave rather than to the positions he successively held.

Representation and Group Authorization:-

The steadiest thread in Ambedkar's electoral writing is a claim about authorization: about who confers a representative's mandate and to whom the representative must therefore answer. The claim requires separating two questions that are easily run together. The first is whether a representative belongs to the group — whether the member holding a reserved seat is himself a member of the Scheduled Castes. The second is whether the group chose the representative — whether the votes that put the member in office came from the Scheduled Castes or from someone else. Ambedkar's argument turns on the second question, and its force lies in his refusal to let the first stand in for it.

The reasoning behind the demand for separate electorates is an argument about that second question. In *States and Minorities*, the memorandum he prepared for the Constituent Assembly in 1947, Ambedkar set out the structural fact that made ordinary majority rule dangerous for the Scheduled Castes. The Indian majority, he argued, was not the shifting, issue-based majority that parliamentary theory assumes. "In India," he wrote, "the majority is not a political majority. It is a communal majority" — a bloc held together by community rather than by programme, and therefore fixed rather than rotating (Ambedkar, 1947/2014). This permanence was the political face of the caste order he had anatomized in *Annihilation of Caste*, a hierarchy that sorted persons by birth and left the Untouchables at the bottom of a structure designed to endure (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Where the majority is of this kind, ordinary elections do not pass power back and forth between changing coalitions; they hand it, permanently, to the same community. Such a system, Ambedkar warned, "would make the majority a governing class and the minority a subject class" (Ambedkar, 1947/2014). A reserved seat filled by a joint electorate sits inside this danger: if the caste Hindus are a permanent majority in the constituency, the votes that decide even a reserved seat are majority votes, and the member who wins them owes his place to the majority.

The demand for separate electorates was therefore, in Ambedkar's hands, instrumental rather than expressive. He did not ask for separate electorates because separateness was a good to be cherished, or because the Depressed Classes possessed a heritage the state should help them preserve. He asked for them because a separate electorate was the one mechanism that guaranteed the answer to the second question: under it, and only under it, the votes that returned the representative came from the group itself. The representative of the Depressed Classes would owe his seat to the Depressed Classes and would have to answer to them. Everything Ambedkar wanted from the arrangement — genuine advocacy, independence from the majority, a representative his own constituents could hold to account because they had elected him — followed from that single feature. Separate electorates were valuable for what they secured, not for what they were.

Pitkin's (1967) account of representation names the two elements at issue. The most basic, "formalistic" conceptions, she observed, concern representation's bookends: authorization, which asks who gave the representative the right to act, and accountability, which asks to whom the representative must answer and who can remove him. Ambedkar's principle can be stated in these terms. A representative of the Scheduled Castes is genuine only when the Scheduled Castes are the ones who authorize him and the ones who can hold him to account. The form of the electorate matters only as a means to that end: a separate electorate secures it directly, while a joint

electorate secures it only where the group's votes actually decide the seat. The principle concerns the source of the mandate; the electorate is the machinery through which the mandate is or is not delivered.

The distinction between principle and machinery yields a test for reading Ambedkar's assessment of the Poona Pact. If his commitment were to separate electorates as a form, a move to joint electorates should provoke his objection regardless of its results. If his commitment were to the principle, his objection should track a single question: whether, under the arrangement in question, the Scheduled Castes' own votes put their representatives in office. In the 1945 book Ambedkar examined the joint electorate in operation rather than in the abstract, which allows the test to be applied.

The 1937 Elections and the Problem of Representation:

Ambedkar's analysis of the first elections held under the new system is the strongest evidence that his objection was a matter of principle rather than form. The Government of India Act of 1935 brought the Poona Pact arrangement into force, and the elections of 1937 were the first in which the Scheduled Castes' reserved seats were filled by joint electorates. Ambedkar studied the returns and set out his conclusion in the 1945 book.

Congress had won the great bulk of the reserved seats, but for Ambedkar this success was itself the proof of failure. The Congress candidates in the reserved constituencies had been carried by caste-Hindu votes and "do not therefore in any way represent the Scheduled Castes" (Ambedkar, 1945/2014, p. iii). The criterion he applied is visible in the way he re-counted the results: of the reserved seats Congress had captured, those it had won "in the real sense" — "with the majority of votes of the Scheduled Castes" — were a far smaller number (Ambedkar, 1945/2014, p. iii). The distinction between winning a seat and winning it with the community's own votes is therefore Ambedkar's own. The men who won these seats were members of the Scheduled Castes and had been returned under the reserved-seat system installed by the Poona Pact; by the tests of group membership and of electoral form, they qualified. Ambedkar nonetheless denied that they represented the Scheduled Castes, because the votes that put them in office were not the community's own. Elected by the majority, they were, in the sense that mattered to him, the majority's men. The same charge runs through the book: the joint electorate had produced Scheduled Caste legislators who depended on caste-Hindu goodwill for their seats.

The objection is not to the joint electorate as a form but to a concrete result: the winning coalition in these seats was a caste-Hindu coalition, and a representative returned on majority votes could not, on Ambedkar's criterion, count as a representative of the minority. It applies the principle of the previous section to a functioning electoral system. The condemnation falls on the joint electorate not because it was joint in name but because, under the franchise then in force, it left the decisive vote with the majority. The complaint concerns the source of the mandate — who was doing the electing — rather than the electoral form.

The mechanism is straightforward. A member returned by caste-Hindu votes depends on caste-Hindu votes to be returned again; his seat lies in the gift of the majority, and the ordinary logic of self-preservation directs his conduct toward those who can keep him in office or remove him. He represents the Scheduled Castes in form — he holds their seat and carries their label — and the majority in substance, since it is the majority to whom he must answer. The Poona Pact settlement had thus reproduced, under a new name, the problem that separate electorates were designed to solve. A separate electorate had answered the question of who elects the representative in favour of the group; the joint electorate, under the conditions of the 1930s, answered it in favour of the majority. The enlarged bloc of reserved seats and the primary election gave Depressed Class voters a preliminary say, but the final and binding vote belonged to the caste Hindus, and the primary was in any case a ten-year concession after which even that filtering would lapse. What remained was a permanent structure in which the majority chose the minority's representatives.

Understood this way, the years of bitterness about the Poona Pact express a consistent judgment rather than wounded pride or nostalgia: the settlement had failed the test Ambedkar cared about. He was not lamenting a form he happened to prefer but recording that the machinery he had been forced to accept did not deliver what representation, on his account, required — a representative whom the group had chosen and could hold to account. The 1937 returns provided the evidence and the 1945 book the analysis, and both are governed by the principle rather than by an attachment to separate electorates as such.

This reading reframes the 1949 acceptance. The question is not why Ambedkar abandoned separate electorates, as though he had abandoned a principle, but why, holding the same principle, he judged a reserved seat inside a joint

electorate acceptable in 1949 when he had judged it unacceptable in 1937. That question concerns the conditions under which the instrument operates, and those conditions had changed in ways that bear directly on his criterion.

The 1949 Settlement and the Continuity of Representational Principle:

Two things were different by 1949, and both bear on the choice of instrument rather than on the principle behind it. The first is the franchise. The elections Ambedkar analysed in the 1945 book had been held under the restricted franchise of the 1935 Act, which enfranchised only a minority of adults, weighted heavily toward property and education (Jafferlott, 2005) — categories in which the Scheduled Castes were thinly represented. Under that franchise the Scheduled Caste vote in a general constituency was small and easily swamped by the caste-Hindu electorate around it, and the joint electorate delivered the seat to the majority almost by construction. The Constitution that Ambedkar's committee was drafting adopted universal adult suffrage, and that change transformed the arithmetic of the reserved seat. Under universal franchise the Scheduled Castes voted in full numbers, and in many constituencies those numbers were large enough to weigh heavily in the outcome of the seats reserved for them. The instrument that had failed the criterion under a narrow franchise could approximate it more closely under a universal one, since the group's own votes now counted for a great deal more in the coalition that returned its representatives — even if, in most reserved constituencies, Scheduled Caste voters remained a minority of the electorate and so did not by themselves control the result. Universal suffrage did not abolish the fact in which Ambedkar had located the failure of the joint electorate — that the decisive votes were the majority's — but it reduced it, and along the dimension relevant to the principle.

This was the condition Ambedkar himself had attached to joint electorates two decades earlier. His 1930 memorandum had refused to have joint electorates “forced upon the Depressed Classes” except where they were “accompanied by adult suffrage” (Ambedkar & Srinivasan, 1930/2014). The Poona Pact had imposed them without that accompaniment; the Constitution supplied it. Measured against his own stated terms, Ambedkar's acceptance of joint electorates in 1949 was not the reversal of an earlier position but the arrival of the circumstance under which he had said joint electorates would be acceptable. Adult suffrage was not an external factor that happened to make the joint electorate more acceptable; it was a condition he had himself identified as bearing on the choice between the two electoral forms.

The link between the 1930 condition and the 1949 acceptance is an interpretive reconstruction. Ambedkar did not, in 1948 or 1949, cite the earlier memorandum or announce that its condition had now been met. The reconstruction is nonetheless anchored in his own words rather than imputed from outside: the franchise condition is one he set down himself, and universal adult suffrage satisfied it. To judge that an instrument now works under conditions one had oneself specified is not to abandon the standard by which the judgment is made; it is to apply that standard to a situation that finally meets it.

The second difference belongs to the politics of the moment. By 1947 separate electorates were no longer a live option. They had come to be seen, across the Assembly and beyond it, as the mechanism that had hardened communal division into two nations, and the memory of Partition made any proposal to extend them politically impossible. By 1949, separate electorates were no longer a politically viable instrument for securing representation for the Scheduled Castes. Faced with an instrument that had become unavailable, Ambedkar took the best one still available.

This second consideration alone is sufficient to dissolve the charge of reversal. A commitment to a principle does not entail insisting on an instrument that is no longer available, and adopting a different instrument when the preferred one has been foreclosed is not a change in the underlying commitment. To read Ambedkar's acceptance of joint electorates as a change of principle would require showing that the principle itself had changed — that he had ceased to hold that the Scheduled Castes must choose and hold to account their own representatives. Neither consideration requires any such change. The franchise argument holds that the instrument now served the principle better; the political argument holds that the preferred instrument was gone and a lesser one had to serve. Both leave the principle in place.

The debates of 1948 and 1949 are consistent with this, since in them Ambedkar continued to treat the underlying danger as real and enduring even as he accepted the joint electorate. He defended the reservation of seats and posts in the language of a remedy for a persisting wrong rather than of a value to be celebrated. In his speech of 30 November 1948 he argued that reservation had to be “confined to a minority of seats” so that the exception would not swallow the rule of equal opportunity (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948), treating group protection as a

bounded corrective rather than a permanent good. On the duration of that protection, however, he pressed for more time rather than less, recording that he had been prepared to seek a longer period for the Scheduled Castes than the Assembly would grant, and longer still for the tribes (Constituent Assembly of India, 1949). This is not the position of someone who believed the problem of majority domination had been solved, but of someone who regarded it as deep and slow to undo. These debates show him treating the danger as undiminished even as he accepted a changed instrument.

His final address to the Assembly makes the same point at the level of the constitutional order as a whole. On 25 November 1949 Ambedkar warned that India was about to enter “a life of contradictions,” granting political equality while leaving social and economic inequality in place, and that the country had to remove this contradiction “at the earliest possible moment” or those who suffered from inequality would “blow up the structure of political democracy” (Constituent Assembly of India, 1949). On this understanding the safeguards answer a contradiction the republic is charged with removing; they are corrective and, in aspiration, temporary. But the contradiction they answer is the one Ambedkar had diagnosed from the start — a social majority converting its weight into permanent political domination. He accepted a milder instrument for holding that domination in check; he did not conclude that the domination had ceased to exist.

The three moments form a single sequence. In the demand for separate electorates, Ambedkar sought an instrument that would give the Scheduled Castes control over the choice of their representatives. In the critique of the Poona Pact, he condemned a joint electorate that, under a narrow franchise, handed that control to the majority. In 1949 he accepted a joint electorate that, under a universal franchise and with no alternative available, could bring that control closer to the group. The instrument changed at each stage; the standard by which he judged it did not. The continuity lies in the concern with who controls the choice of representatives, not in any particular electoral form.

Objections and Limits of the Instrumental Interpretation:

Two passages complicate the instrumental reading, since each appears, at first sight, to value the separateness of the Scheduled Castes for its own sake. The first is his proposal, in the 1940s, for separate settlements — villages inhabited exclusively by Untouchables, physically apart from the caste-Hindu village (Ambedkar, 1947/2014). The proposal makes separateness concrete and sits awkwardly beside the claim that Ambedkar valued separation only as a means. His justification for it, however, was instrumental and directed at autonomy rather than at separateness as such. The Untouchable’s subordination in the shared village, he argued, rested on dependence — on caste-Hindu landowners for work, for water, for the necessities of life — a dependence that made resistance suicidal and held the apparatus of untouchability in place. The separate settlement was proposed as a means of breaking that dependence, giving the Untouchable a base from which he could not be starved into submission. The aim is the one that runs through the electoral writings: to free the group from the majority’s power over it. Territorial separation may have been an unwise means to that end, but it figures in the proposal as an instrument directed at autonomy, not as evidence that Ambedkar had come to value separation for itself.

The second is his description of the Scheduled Castes, in an appendix to the 1945 book, as “a distinct and separate element in the national life of India,” and as a minority in a sense “more real” than the religious minorities to which the term was usually applied (Ambedkar, 1945/2014). The language of durable distinctness appears to cut against a project whose horizon was the disappearance of caste. In context, however, the claim concerns the depth of the injury rather than the value of the separation. Ambedkar’s point is that the Scheduled Castes are more thoroughly excluded than the religious minorities — their separateness more complete and more damaging — and that this is a reason they require greater protection, not a reason their separateness should be preserved. The separateness he describes is the one imposed on the group by the caste order, which his larger project sought to end. Describing the injury as deep does not amount to wishing it permanent.

Neither passage overturns the reading, though the separate-settlements proposal shows that the instrumental interpretation must accommodate material that does not fit it easily. In each case the question is whether the passage is better explained as valuing separateness for its own sake or as an instrument, however debatable, aimed at freeing the group from the majority’s power. Both are better explained in the second way. Across the electoral writings, the value doing the work is autonomy from a dominating majority, and separateness figures characteristically as a means to it rather than as a good valued for its own sake.

Conclusion:-

The demand for separate electorates and the acceptance of joint electorates have long appeared to present two Ambedkars — the uncompromising champion of the 1930s and the accommodating constitutionalist of the 1940s — with the transition between them read as loss, as bargain, or as growth. Read for their reasons rather than their positions, the electoral writings present a broadly consistent figure holding to one underlying principle. What Ambedkar wanted was not a particular form of ballot but a settled answer to the question of who chooses the representatives of a group that a permanent majority is otherwise positioned to speak for. His writings return to the same answer: the representatives must be chosen by the group and answerable to it.

Separate electorates were the instrument he judged best able to deliver that answer under a restricted franchise, and he fought for them as hard as he fought for anything, while stipulating from 1930 onward that joint electorates would serve once adult suffrage accompanied them. When the 1937 returns showed that the joint electorate, under a narrow franchise, delivered the opposite — representatives installed by the majority and beholden to it — he condemned the arrangement in those terms. When universal suffrage altered the arithmetic and the politics of the moment closed off the alternative, he accepted a joint electorate that could bring the answer closer to the group. The electoral arrangement changed across these three moments; the underlying representational concern remained substantially continuous.

This reading does not make Ambedkar a systematic theorist of representation; he wrote for particular occasions and did not set out a general account of the representative relation. Nor does it establish that his instrumental judgments were sound — whether separate electorates were in fact the best safeguard available in the 1930s, or whether the reserved seat has served the Scheduled Castes well under universal franchise, on which the later record is mixed (Galanter, 1984) and the effects of recognition of this kind remain contested (Rao, 2009). What the electoral writings suggest is that his commitment was not to separate electorates as such, but to the representational condition they were intended to secure.

The distinction extends beyond Ambedkar's biography. Arguments about the political representation of subordinated groups still tend to run along the axis of institutional form — separate rolls or common ones, reserved seats or open competition, quotas or their absence — as though the form itself were what is at stake. Ambedkar's electoral writings locate the form downstream of a prior question: not which electoral arrangement to adopt, but by whom the representatives are chosen. He held to that question for three decades, through victory, defeat, and compromise, and it is what gives his shifting positions their coherence.

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