Chapter-III

Welfare of Depressed Classes - Ambedkar’s Approach

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was born at Mhow (Indore) on 14 April 1891 in an untouchable Mahar family of Maharastra. At that time, the untouchables were segregated and discriminated against on the basis of caste in every aspect of Indian society i.e. socio-economic and political. The severe social disabilities which the Untouchables were made to suffer at that time have been very vividly summed up by Ambedkar’s Biographer Dhanjay Keer in the following words:

“Their(Untouchables) touch, shadow and even voice were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. Do they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste Hindu. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animal, to use certain metals for ornaments, were obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of footwear and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy and unhygienic outskirts of villages and towns for habitation where they lived in dark, insanitary and miserably smoky shanties or cottages. The dress of the male consisted of a turban, a staff in the hand, a rough blanket on the shoulder and a piece of loin cloth. The women wore bodices and rough sarees barely reaching the knees.”

These untouchables Hindus were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools attended by the caste Hindu Children. Though they worshipped the gods of Hindus, observed the same festivals, the Hindu, who fondly threw sugar to ants and reared dogs and other domestic pets and welcomed persons of other religions to their

houses, refused to give a drop of water to the Untouchables or to show them an iota of sympathy. These untouchables Hindus were treated by the caste Hindus as sub-humans, less than men, worse than beasts. Cities have now mostly overcome this prejudices.

Their miseries did not end at this. They were illiterate, ill-treated and untouchable for ages, all public services including police and military forces were closed to them. Naturally, they followed hereditary occupations. Some of them plied trades of a lower and degrading order such as those of street-sweepers, scavengers and shoemakers. Some skinned carcasses, tanned hides and skins, worked in bamboos and cane and mowed grass. Others who were more fortunate tilled the land as tenants, worked as labourers in fields, a great number of them subsisted on food or grain given to them as village servants and also ate carrion. Thus being deprived of social, religious and civic rights, they had no chance of bettering their conditions and so these untouchables Hindus lived in the life of a bygone and dead aged, dragging on their miserable existence in insufficient accommodation, insanitary surroundings and social segregation. In short, they were born in debt and perished in debt. They were born Untouchables and they died as Untouchables.

As an untouchable, Ambedkar was subjected to sever insults and indignities not only during his student days but also during the days he was occupying important positions in Government. The ghost of untouchabiliy was closely haunting him wherever he went. That made him fight tooth and nail to remove it root and branch. Some of the such incident of his life shall remind the harrowing truths of his life and time. During his school days, on a summer day, Ambedkar and his elder brother
Balram had set out from Satra to meet their father Ramji Maloji Sakpal, who was working as a Cashier at Goregaon after his retirement from Military. As their father did not turn up at Mansur Railway station. They waited at the Station for a very long time. At last, with the good offices of the Station Master, they secured a bullock-cart and set out for Goregaon. After the cart had moved a few yards, the cartmen, who was a caste Hindu, enquired about their caste. On hearing that they belonged to Mahar community, he got enraged and instantly threw them out on the road as one overturns the dustbins, ‘for he felt polluted his wooden cart and destroyed the purity of his domestic animals’. However, his anger subsided when they offered him double the fare. The cart-man followed the cart on foot while young Balram drove the cart. They reached the destination at midnight. Once at Goregoan a barber who claimed social superiority over the untouchables, refused to cut the hair of Ambedkar fearing that it shall defile the purity of the razor. In class room the young Ambedkar was to sit segregated from his fellow students lest his presence pollute the other caste Hindu boys. 

Ambedkar had received monetary help from Baroda Maharaja Shayajirao Gaekwar for prosecuting his studies abroad. He returned to India with high academic qualifications. He decided to join the Baroda State Service. The Baroda Maharaja wanted to appoint him as Finance Minister after Ambedkar gained some experience in the State service. He, therefore, appointed his as a probationary Military Secretary to the Maharaja.

In fact, when the Maharaja learnt that Ambedkar was arriving Baroda, he

\[2\] Ibid., p. 12
ordered his men to receive him at the Railway Station. But none received him at the station, being an Untouchable. The staff and the peons were hostile to him in the office. The illiterate caste Hindu peons used to flung file and hurled paper at his desk for the fear of being polluted by an Untouchable Military Secretary. Drinking water was not made available to him from the common source.

Bombay Government appointed Ambedkar as a member of State committee to inquire into the education, social and economic condition of the depressed classes and Aboriginal Tribes of the Presidency and to recommend measures for their uplift. The members of the Committee visited Belgaum, Khandesh and Nasik Districts.

At Chalisgaon, he was to attend a reception to be accorded to him by his followers. The caste Hindu tonga-drivers refused to carry him being an Untouchable. However, as a compromise, an inexperienced tonga-driver had agreed to drive the tonga. Since he was an inexperienced driver, the horse bolted and as a result Ambedkar was thrown on the stone pavement. A grievous bodily injury was caused to him.

Writing about the above incident to the Director of Public Instruction, Poona over a month later i.e., December 8, 1929, Ambedkar mentioned “The tonga in which I was travelling on October 23, 1929, overturned and I was thrown out. Owing to the accident one of the Bones of my right foot was fractured. As a result of the fracture, I was confined to bed till the last week of December and though I am in a position to move about I cannot do without the help of a stick.”

Ambedkar, despite adverse conditions, studied hard and acquired the highest

3 Ibid., p. 133.

Baba Saheb, as he was popularly known after completing his education, started to work for his people. First in 1919, he gave evidence before the Southborough committee to constitute separate electorates for the untouchables. He started a weekly paper Mooknayak (Leader of the Dumb) on 31\textsuperscript{st} January, 1920, to mobilise the untouchables for the struggle\textsuperscript{4}. In 1924, he established the Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha. The aim of this Sabha was to prepare the untouchables for the future struggle. Through this sabha, Ambedkar gave a clarion call to his people to educate, organise and agitate.

Baba Saheb was great in his life time, he continues to grow in stature after his demise in 1956. This is explained not so much by his singular contribution in the drafting of the Indian constitution, as by the fact of his deep and abiding empathy with the cause of the Dalits, his uncompromising political stance and untiring efforts for the amelioration of their lot - a class which has by now attained not only a political identity of their own, but also the capability to substantially (if not decisively) influence the electoral politics of the country. The more the empowerment of the Dalits, the greater would be the stature and relevance of Ambedkar. His observations too, regarding the action, reaction and inter-action of social, economic and political pulls and pressures operating in the country and ways of channelising them along democratic and

egalitarian lines, are coming true with the passage of time. Baba Saheb deeply craved for a new social order to be based on the lofty principles of liberty, equality, fraternity and justice. These principles constitute the core of his social, political and legal philosophy.

A socio-legal thinker is supposed to address himself to two basic question: what type of society common people desire? And what kind of polity they want? Ambedkar too had to address himself to these questions. He deeply desired a social order in which every individual can develop his or her personality and seek happiness. He also wanted a polity which is based on democratic values. He looked upon law as a vital means for social change or social engineering. The end of social engineering, should, of course, be social justice. The concept of social justice is at the centre of Ambedkar’s socio-legal philosophy.

Ambedkar was the spokesman and the leader of the untouchables. He believed that the lot of the untouchables could not be improved unless they were given a separate representation in the Central and Provincial legislatures. According to him the depressed classes and the untouchables communities constituted an oppressed minority in Hindu society. He emphasised the need of recognising them as a political minority which required legal or constitutional safeguards.

In a memorandum submitted to the Governor-General on 29th October, 1942, Ambedkar enlisted the grievances of the depressed classes. These grievances are divided into three categories: (1) Political, (2) Educational and (3) Other grievances.

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5. The decision of the Supreme Court of India in Indra Sawhney v. Union of India, (AIR, 1993 SC 477) makes a number of reference to Ambedkar’s speech on the quantum of reservation.

These categories are further divided into parts as follow:

**Part I Political Grievances**

1. Inadequate representation in the Central Legislature.
2. Inadequate representation in the Central Executive.
3. Absence of representation in the Public Service.

**Part-II Educational Grievances**

5. Want of Aid for University and Advance Education.

**Part-III Other Grievances**

8. Untouchables and Government contracts.

**Part IV Duty of Government towards Distressed people**

A study of this memoranda reveals the mind of Ambedkar, how he felt about the problems being faced by the depressed classes (as the Scheduled Castes were called at that time) and their solutions. These grievances were those, those could only be redressed by the Central Government. Pointing out the fact that the Central Assembly consisted of 141 members, of these 102 elected and 39 nominated, Ambedkar pleaded that to put forth the case of depressed classes forcefully they should be given larger representation in the Assembly that commensurate with their population percentage. Rao Bahadur N. Sivaraj was the only solitary nominated representative of depressed classes in the assembly, who found himself helpless to ventilate the grievances of the depressed classes, as such it was of great necessity that the representation of the
depressed classes in the assembly be augmented. Similarly, Ambedkar pointed out that
the representation of depressed classes in the Cabinet was very inadequate. In a cabinet
of 15, there was only 1 member of the depressed classes while the Muslims have 3
members. According to him this grievance arose by reason of the great contrast
between the representation granted to the various communities and their needs and
their numbers. If the population alone was the criterion there is no doubt that the
depressed classes are very near to the Muslims in the matter of population. It is
therefore only fair to say that if the Muslims have three, the depressed classes should at
least have two in a cabinet of fifteen. The Sikhs who number only a million and the
untouchables who number 40 millions are placed on the same footings.

On the issue of absence of representation of depressed classes in the Public
services (services controlled by the central government). Ambedkar drew the attention
of the Government to the fact that out of 1056 men in the ICS there was only 1 from
the depressed classes. For this state of affairs, he blamed the principle of communal
representation in the centrally controlled services adopted by the Government in the
year 1925. According to this principle Government of India was to reserves one-third
of all permanent vacancies for direct recruitment for the redress of communal
inequalities. Under the provisions made by the Government of India for securing the
recruitment of the depressed classes and for the other minor communities to the Public
Services, it was made a mere matter of discretion. The recruiting authority may fill an
unreserved vacancy by appointing a person from the depressed classes, whereas it was
obligatory that the recruiting authority must fill in vacancy by recruiting a person,
belonging to the community for which the vacancy is reserved. Ambedkar held that the
question of entry into the Public Service was an important question for all minority communities but to the depressed classes it is a vital question, a question of life and death. There are many reasons why this must be so. In the first place, it is a question of opening up a career for young men from the depressed classes. This is an aspect of the question which the depressed classes, and even the Government of India, cannot ignore. Trade and industry, as opening of a career, are all blocked to young men of depressed classes. It is only in Government that they can find a career. While this is an important aspect, it is not the only aspect which makes this question so vital. For there is another aspect which is calculated to invest it with such importance. That aspect relates to the effect which the bestowal of government patronage has in encouraging the spread of education in a community. There is a third argument far more weighty than the two which have been referred to above. It relates to the interest of the general population of the depressed class people as distinguished from the interest of the educated classes from the depressed classes. This will be clear if it is realised how important public administration is from the point of view of public welfare. In the first place, in his view, the power of administration now a days includes the power to legislate. No statue in modern days is complete and exhaustive. Most allow the administration the statutory power to make rules to carry into effect the purpose of the Act. Secondly, whether the law is beneficial or not depends upon how efficaciously and how justly it is carried out. Good administration is therefore far more important than good laws. Good laws may prove of no avail if the administration is bad. Administration is therefore a vital question for the depressed classes who are more interested in good administration then in good laws. Indeed much of the suffering and
harassment of the depressed class population arises from the fact that the discretion rested in public servants is in almost all cases exercised against the interests of the depressed classes and with the object of keeping them down. This will continue to be so as long as the personnel of the administration is drawn from classes who have been opposed to the depressed classes and who believe in their suppression. There cannot be a more powerful argument than that of the advantage and welfare of the general population of the depressed classes to show that the entry of the depressed classes in public service must be regarded as a most vital consideration.

Ambedkar further suggested that to increase the representation of depressed classes in public services, these classes should be declared a ‘minority’ and their proportion in the annual vacancies be fixed. Besides this he also suggested that for the depressed classes the age bar should be raised from 24 years to 27 years and the examination fees for the examinations be reduced to one fourth of the fee chargeable. To make sure that the concessions allowed to the depressed classes actually assist them to complete with general candidates and their claims of their entry in the public service are fully met with, the Government of India should appoint a depressed class officer either in the Home Department or Labour Department to oversee that the rules are carried out.

The fourth political grievances of the depressed class pertained to the absence of representation of depressed class member in the Federal Public service commission. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that there are four members who at present constitute the Federal public service commission. Of these, two are Europeans, one is a Hindu and one is a Mohemdan. The depressed classes have been left out in framing the
composition of the Federal Public Service Commission and thus they cannot repose the confidence in the commission as much as they ought to have placed. Which ever way one looks at it, the omission to give representation to the depressed classes on the Federal Public Service Commission is sheer injustice. The depressed classes cannot have any confidence in a public service commission which is infected by the point of view of the Hindus and the Muslims who with all their quarrels can very easily unite to distribute the loaves and fishes among themselves and keep out the depressed classes from getting their due share. It is difficult to prove that the commission has been unjust to the depressed classes though the fact remains that not a single depressed class has so far been certified by the commission to be fit. For no commission can be convicted of partiality. It is open to every commission to take shelter under that most elusive term 'unsuitable'. That term far from giving an explanation is intended to cover a multitude of sins. Justice requires that the depressed classes should get representation on the Federal Public Service Commission which is their due.

Baba Saheb while enlisting the education grievances drew the attention of the government towards the want of Assistance for Advance Education and also lack of facilities for technical training and technical education.

Dwelling on the first point of want of assistance for advanced education he held that looking at the growth of advance education among the depressed class boys, the following conclusions are deducible:

1. That education in arts and law is progressing satisfactorily.
2. That education in science and engineering has made no progress.
3. That advance education in foreign universities is a very far away.
Ambedkar was not at all happy that the depressed classes candidate should acquire the education in Arts and Law and be offered only the ministerial jobs in the government. To this, he opined that the representation of the depressed classes if it is confined to ministerial posts will be of no consequence no matter how numerous are the posts they are permitted to occupy. This may be good from the stand point of providing a career for educated young men. It cannot affect the condition of the depressed classes. The status and condition of the depressed classes will be improved only when the representatives of the depressed classes come to occupy executive posts as distinguished from ministerial posts. Executive posts are strategic posts, posts from which a new direction can be given to the affairs of the state. The attainment of executive post it is obvious, requires a high degree of education. Such posts will not be open except to those who have acquired advanced education. In his views the key to future progress of depressed classes as a whole lied in their acquiring advanced education in science and technology. He thought that the education in Arts and Law cannot be of much value to the depressed classes either to the graduates themselves or to the people. It has not been of very high value even to others. What will help the depressed classes is education of an advanced type in science and technology. But it is obvious that education in science and technology is beyond the means of the depressed classes and this is why so many of them send their children to take up courses in Arts and Laws. Without Government assistance, the field of advanced education in science and technology will never become open to the depressed classes, and it is only just and proper that the Central Government should come forward to aid them in this connection.
Ambedkar sought the solution of above problems by putting forth a proposal before the Government that an annual grant of Rs. 2 lakhs be made available for scholarships to the depressed classes students taking science and technology courses tenable at the universities or other scientific and technical training institutions in India. And further, an annual grant of one lakh of rupees to be spent on scholarships for the education of depressed class students for science and technology in foreign universities in England, the Dominion, in Europe and in America. He was so excited by such a scheme that he even suggested that if the proposal can’t be implemented by way of a grant to depressed classes candidates then it may be treated as a loan advanced to them. He said, “The scheme if it is given effect to will revolutionise the condition and status of depressed classes. They would even be prepared for the scheme being made a loan system rather then a system of grants. The depressed classes boys who receive these scholarships shall be glad to take advantage of it even if they are required to refund the sums received by them when they are employed or they may be made to serve the government for a term under a lower scale of salary. There can be no objection to Government accepting these proposal.”

Reminding the Government functions of Central Advisory Board of Education, Ambedkar put an other proposal of giving representation to the depressed classes on the Central Advisory Board of Education. According to him the functions of the board are:

(a) To advise on any educational question which may be referred to it by the Government of India or by local government.

7 Ibid., p. 429.
(b) To call for information and advice regarding educational developments of special interest and value to India; to examine this information and to circulate it with recommendations to the Government to India and to local Government.

From the functions of the Board it is quite clear that the Board can study the educational problem of the depressed classes as that of special interest and from recommendations and advice Central and Provincial Governments in that connection. Such a thing can be of immense importance in focusing the attentions of the Governments and the Universities on the spread of Higher education among the depressed classes. It is however, necessary in the first place to get the Board interested in the educational problem of special classes like the depressed classes. This can be done only by giving representation to members of the depressed classes on the Board. It is, therefore, he suggested that two representatives of the depressed classes should be nominated on the Board. Driving home the point that for raising the economic condition, technical education for the depressed classes is more important than literary education, Ambedkar lamented the lack of facilities for Technical Training and Technical Education. He realised that technical education is also very costly and it is not possible for children of the depressed classes to take technical education and without technical education their economic condition will not be improved. Owing to the social system, the depressed classes occupy economically a very low place in the Indian economy. In times of prosperity he is last to be employed, and in times of depression he is first to be discharged. This, of course, is result of the social prejudices which operate against him. But there is also the other difficulty which stand in his way and that is he is generally an unskilled labourer with no technical knowledge. To
overcome this handicap, Ambedkar urged the Government that to improve their lot the government can introduce a system of apprenticeship for the depressed class boys in undertakings run or controlled by the government of India in which the possibilities of giving such technical training do exist. Government printing presses and railway workshops were two government controlled institutes which were referred to by Ambedkar where the depressed class boys in good numbers could be taken as apprentice for technical training as technicians and later provided suitable jobs in these very institutions.

In Part-III of the memorandum submitted by Ambedkar to Government of India, he enlisted two other grievances of the depressed class as neglect in the matter of publicity and closed door in Government contract. Ambedkar pointed out that the Government had been unfair to depressed classes and for that matter to their leaders to not to give their action and importance pronouncement due place in the official propaganda literature or publications. Referring to collection of saying and doing of the Political parties and politicians in the country and thus presenting a full resume of the views of the majority and minority in India complied in a volume called 'India and the Aggressor (The Trend of Indian Opinion Between 1935-40)' issued by the Bureau of Public Information of the Govt. of India, Dr. Ambedkar pointed out “Now the most annoying part of this volume is the complete neglect of saying and doing of the depressed classes. Out of the 940 pages, 158 pages are given to the congress, 85 pages are allotted to the Muslims. The Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu league are given about 10 pages. The Liberal Federation has received 16 pages. The Sikhs are spread over 6 pages. Indian Christians over 2 pages and the depressed classes are disposed of
in about 3 pages and what is surprising is that in these 3 pages devoted to the depressed classes the material which is included is of trifling character. It omits altogether to take notice of some of the most important events that have taken place during this period and important pronouncements made by leading individuals from the depressed class. 8 For to give a true and correct picture of the movements and forces operating in the country, Ambedkar pressed that the Bureau of Public Information be asked to prepare a supplement to the volume which it has issued giving full space to movements carried on by the depressed classes and the pronouncements their leader have made.

Bringing home the pernicious effect of this neglect on part of the government Ambedkar further added, "It is true that this volume is intended for official use only. But in my opinion this fact does not alter the great value which the compilation must necessarily have. It goes without saying that it is the mind of the official which is, to a large degree, responsible for determining the direction which the affairs of the state will take. It also determines the value which he ought to give to issue in which communal interest are involved. It also goes without saying that the attitude and the mind of the official is bound to be determined by the bind of material which is presented to him and on which he feeds on a volume like this. Further, the degree of publicity given to a cause by Government in a Government publication may be treated by him as the value which government attaches to it and as direction for him for evaluating the needs and claims of different communities. Looked at from this point of view this volume is sure to give to the officers working in the Central Secretariat as

8 Ibid., p. 433.
well as in the Provincial Government and even to the secretary to state the impression
that the government of India regards the depressed classes as a negligible force not
worth bothering about. That this is the effect which this volume has produce is evident
from the speech delivered in Parliament by the Secretary of State where the references
to the problems are emphatic and positive while the references to the depressed classes
are just of a parenthetical character. It is a grievous wrong done to the depressed class
whose cause has received a set back at a most critical period in their struggle by reason
of this unbalanced presentation of their case on the part of the Government."

Again pointing out that there even prevail some sort of prejudice against the
depressed classes in granting of contract for execution of work under the Central
Public Works Department. Out of a total 1,171 approved contractor of CPWD only
one was from the depressed classes. For this Ambedkar held responsible the
discretionary power vested in the tender accepting authority. He maintained that there
is not much difficulty in getting a certain number of men from the depressed classes put
on the list of approved contractors. But what is important is to enable them to get a
contract. These are two rules in the matter of Government contracts:-

(1) That a contract is to be given generally to a contractor whose tender is the lowest;
(2) That Government is not bound to accept the lowest tender.

It is therefore, a matter of discretion which is exercised by the officer in charge
whether a contract will go to a particular contractor or not. This discretion is not likely
to be exercised in favour of a depressed classes contractors. His tender may be the
lowest but owing to communal prejudice he may not accept it and rely on the second

9 Ibid., p. 434.
rule 'that he is not bound to accept the lowest'. If his tender is higher than the lowest, he will not accept it although he is free to do so. He will rely on the first of the two rules. Either way he will have his justification for rejecting the tender of the depressed classes contractors.

He said, "There is of course, no remedy against communal laws. The only thing that strikes me that we can do is to amend the rule by saying that a tender of a depressed class contractor, if it is not higher than the lowest by 5 percent shall be deemed to be the lowest. This, of course involves financial loss and the Finance department will have to agree to it. I cannot give any idea of the approximate cost of such a concession. I am sure it will not be heavy as to break the camel's back."10

After putting forth the grievances and possible means to redress them Ambedkar in part IV of the memorandum reminded to the government its duty toward distressed people. According to him the policy of the British Government towards depressed classes has been one of the complete and continuous neglect. It began from the very beginning when the British Government realised that its duty was not merely to maintain law and order but extend to giving education to the people and looking after their welfare. Dwelling further on the educational opportunities before the depressed classes, Ambedkar noted that in 1882 Government of India appointed the Hunter commission to examine the Educational Policy. This commission made a number of important proposals to spread education among Muslims. With regard to the untouchables it did nothing. All that it did was to express an opinion that, "Government should accept the principle that nobody be refused admission to

10 Ibid., p. 436.
Government college or school merely on the ground of caste, but qualified it by saying that the principles should be applied with due caution."\textsuperscript{11} Ambedkar further added that this antagonism when passed away, its place was taken up by negligence and indifference not merely in the field of education, it also made its appearance in other fields, particularly in the Army. The whole Army of the East India Company consisted of the depressed classes. Indeed but for the depressed classes Army the British would never have been able to conquer India. The untouchable continued to fill the Army till 1892. In 1892 their recruitment in the Army was stopped all of a sudden and they were thrown in the street in utter distress with no education and no means to pursue other ways of honourable living. As the then Central Government took responsibility of welfare of Anglo-Indians to itself, Dr. Ambedkar also insisted upon the same treatment for the depressed classes also. He pointed out that the Anglo-Indian received a higher salary then the Indians and the pass marks and aggregate marks were reduced for them to enable them to complete successfully against others. There are many other recommendations made by the Stewart Committee on the Anglo Indians intended to give them special advantage over Indians. By this he showed the marked contrast between the treatment accorded to the Anglo-Indians and depressed classes. "The care of the former and the neglect of the latter stand out in a marked contrast. What is that can justify this contrast? The sooner the Central Government proceed to assist the depressed classes the better, only then this Government will rank as a Government based on justice."\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 440.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 442.
classes were more political in nature than social. Submitting a report on May 17, 1929, Ambedkar as member of the committee appointed by the Bombay Legislature Council to co-operate with the Statutory Commission regarding changes that should be made in the constitution of the Government of the Bombay Presidency recorded, "There is a view that the problem of the depressed classes is a social problem and that its solution must be sought for in the social field. I am surprised that this view prevails even in high quarters. I am afraid that those who hold the view forget that every problem in human society is a social problem. The drink problem, the problem of wages, of hours of work, of housing, of unemployment insurance are all social problems. In the same sense problem of untouchability is also a social problem. But the question is not whether the problem is a social problem. The question is whether the use of political power can solve that problem. To that question my answer is emphatically in the affirmative. True enough that the state in India will not be able to compel touchable and untouchables to be member of our family whether they liked it or not. Nor will the state be able to make them love by an Act of the Legislature or embrace by order in Council of the Executive. But short of that the state can remove all obstacles which make untouchables remain in their degraded condition. If this view is correct, then no community has a greater need for adequate political representation than the depressed classes."

For more political representation of depressed classes Ambedkar emphasised the necessity of separate electorate both in Provincial and Central legislature. To him the representation of the depressed classes has been grossly abused in the past as much

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as persons other than the depressed classes were nominated to represent them in the Provincial Legislature, and cases are not wanting in which persons not belonging to the depressed classes got themselves nominated as representative of the depressed classes. To correct it, he suggested a different method of representation for depressed classes that the depressed classes shall have the right to elect their representatives to the Provincial and Central legislature through separate electorate of their votes. For their representation in the Upper House of the Federal or Central Legislature, if it is decided to have indirect election by members of the Provincial legislature, the depressed classes will agree to abandon their right to separate electorates so far as their representation to the Upper House is concerned subject to this; that in any system of proportional representation arrangement shall be made to guarantee to them their quota of seats. Regarding replacement of separate electorates for the depressed classes, he held that these shall not be liable to be replaced by a system of joint electorates and reserved seats, except when the following conditions are fulfilled:

(a) A referendum of the voters held at the demand of a majority of their representatives in the legislature concerned and resulting in an absolute majority of the members of the depressed classes having the franchise.

(b) No such referendum shall be resorted to until after twenty years and until universal adult suffrage has been established.14

Taking stock of the then prevailing political situations, Ambedkar held, “The inevitable conclusion which the depressed classes have come to namely, that the

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bureaucratic Government in India, with the least of motives, will remain powerless to
effect any change so far as our particular grievances are concerned. We feel that no
body can remove our grievances as well, as we can, and we cannot remove them unless
we get political power in our own hands. No share of this political power can evidently
come to us so long as the British government remains as it is. It is only in a Swaraj
constitution that we stand any chance of getting the political power into our own
hands, without which we cannot bring salvation to our people".15

The Indian statutory commission virtually agreeing to above suggestion of
Ambedkar, conceded that in the long run, the progress of depressed classes, so far as it
can be secured by the exercise of political influence, will depend on their getting a
position of sufficient importance for other elements to seek their support and to
consider their needs. The Indian Franchise Committee, known as Lothian Committee
collectively defined the depressed classes and thoroughly examined their case for
political safeguards. Ambedkar was also one of its signatories and he also submitted a
detailed note separately. The committee opined, “Political influence is largely wielded
by the vote and whatever system of representation is ultimately decided upon for them
the depressed classes, we are of the opinion that their interests as well as those of the
country at large will be best served by bringing on the electoral rolls of the Provinces a
larger proportion of the depressed classes than our general proposal will not secure.
We, therefore, recommended that some form of differential franchise should be devised
whereby the levelling up of the depressed class vote may be possible.”16

15 Indian Round Table Conference proceedings - First Session, November 12, 1930 to January 19,
16 Indian Franchise Committee Report, headed by the Marquess of Lothian (London: Government of
Great Britain), Volume I, 1932, pp. 201-11.
What followed later is known as announcement of Communal award by Premier Ramsay McDonald. In a nutshell, the British proposal was that there will be a number of special seats for the depressed classes which will be filled by election from special constituencies. The select constituencies were to be formed only in areas where the depressed classes were most numerous and except in Madras they should not cover the whole area of the Province. The British Prime Minister further clarified in a letter to Gandhi that the number of special seats thus created will be seen to be small and was just not intended to provide a quota numerically appropriate for the total representation of the whole of the Depressed class population. The arrangement was temporarily limited to twenty years. Gandhi however, considered these proposal of the British Government as a sinister design to vivisect and disrupt Hinduism.\textsuperscript{17} The mere fact that Depressed classes had two votes, under the proposals, said Gandhi “does not protect them or Hindu society in general from being disrupted.”\textsuperscript{17} Such a system was tantamount to ‘the injection of poison that is calculated to destroy Hinduism and do no good whatever to the depressed classes’. A statutory separation even in a limited form, from the Hindu fold, will be harmful for them ‘as it would arrest the marvellous growth of the work of Hindus reformers who have dedicated themselves to the uplift of their suppressed brethren in every walk of life’. Gandhi disputed the claim of the British, however, sympathetic they might be, to ‘come to a correct decision on a matter of such vital and religious importance of the parties concerned’.\textsuperscript{18} Gandhi made it crystal clear that for him the matter was entirely a religious one. He observed that for him the

\textsuperscript{17} Letter from Mahatma Gandhi to Sir Samuel Hoare, Yerveda Central Prison, March 11, 1932 as reprinted in Chanchreek, K. L.(ed.), op. cit., p. 266.

question of these classes is predominantly moral and religious. The political aspect, important though it is, dwindles into insignificance compared to the moral and religious issue.19

Ambedkar reacted violently to Gandhi’s fast against the announcement of Communal Award. He maintained that the Mahatma’s argument were strange and incomprehensible of the depressed classes. Ambedkar complained ‘he has staked his very life in order to deprive them of little they have got.’ He counselled Mahatma that his determination to fast unto death is worthy of a far better cause. He urged the Mahatma to freely consult the members of the depressed classes in the full confidence that if they were given a choice, ‘between Hindu faith and possession of political power’ they would choose the later and thus ‘save the Mahatma’. He charged him with ‘releasing uncontrolled reactionary forces’ and widening the ‘gulf between the Depressed classes and the Hindus.’20

Ambedkar maintained that the untouchables were an element separate from Hinduism and went to great length to prove it. He went to the root of the matter when he said that the Hindus had much to lose by the abolition of untouchability though they had nothing to fear from political reservations leading to this abolition. The matter was economic rather then religious.; He observed, “The system of untouchability is a gold mine to the Hindus. In it the 240 million of Hindus have 60 million of untouchables to serve as their retinue to enable the Hindus to maintain pomp and ceremony and to cultivate a feeling of pride and dignity befitting a master class, which cannot be fostered and sustained unless there is beneath it a servile class to look down upon. In it

20 Moon, Vasant (ed.) op. cit., Volume 9, pp. 311-17.
the 240 millions of Hindus have 60 million of untouchables to be used as forced labourers – in it the 240 million of Hindus have 60 million of untouchables to do the dirty work of scavengers and sweepers which the Hindu is debarred by his religion to do and which must be done by non-Hindus who could be no others then untouchables. In it the 240 million of Hindus have 60 millions of untouchables who can be kept to lower jobs. In it the 240 millions of Hindus have the 60 millions of untouchables who can be used as shock absorbers in slumps and dead weights in booms, for in slumps it is the untouchables who is fired first and the Hindu is fired last and in booms the Hindu is employed first and the untouchable is employed last. Untouchability is not a religious system but an economic system which is worse than slavery."

Mahatma Gandhi began his fast against the grant of separate electorate to the Depressed classes in Yervada prison on 20 September ending it only on 24 September, upon the signing of the Poona Pact. Ambedkar accepted a total of 148 reserved seats in all Legislature. Gandhi agreed to a collegiate procedure for election to reserved seats where by a panel of four candidates belonging to the depressed class will be ‘the candidates for election by a general electorate’: a kind of ‘primary’ election procedure. This system was to continue until ten years, unless terminated by mutual agreement. The pact also provided that there shall be no disabilities to anyone, by reason of his being a member of the depressed classes, for election of local bodies or appointment to public services. There was further the agreement that an adequate sum shall be made available for providing educational facilities to the members of the depressed classes in every Province.

The Poona pact no doubt gave more seats to the depressed classes; the award had given them only 78 separate electoral seats while they had in 1937 as many as 151 seats. As Ambedkar himself put it, its increase in seats could never compensate for the priceless privilege of the second vote given to the untouchables. The value of such a vote as a political weapon was beyond reckoning. Out of 151 only 73 victorious candidates were true and independent representatives whereas 78 untouchables were elected as Congress party members. Ambedkar pithily commented that the Congress made, through the Poona Pact ‘a handsome profit on its political transaction’ and continued to demand separate electorate for the depressed classes till independence. It was in this context that the Constituent Assembly debated the question as to whether there should be any reservations at all for depressed classes and tribes. There was some suggestion that the system of separate electorate be considered but this was pressed only feebly since all other communities had agreed to dispense with communal or separate electoral quotas. However, in consultation with and in deference to the wishes of Scheduled Caste leaders, it was decided to provide for an interim system of legislative reservations for a period of ten years. No doubt, there were voices against this arrangement and Ambedkar himself who had earlier canvassed tentatively the idea of separate electorate, was later in favour of electoral integration. But he, and others, yielded to the transitional system. Apprehension were, of course, voiced that the transitional system may in course of time, become permanent. But somehow people were persuaded to believe that it would not be so since in independent India there would occur swift and thorough going ameliorative changes in the plight of the Scheduled Castes. People also felt reassured, particularly the depressed classes, by the
rapprochement between the Congress and Ambedkar that manifested in the leading role he was assigned in the formulation of the Constitution and in his nomination as the First Law Minister of independent India.

However, all this was short lived. Ambedkar resigned from the Nehru cabinet. Although he resigned on the issue of the Hindu Code Bill, his publicly stated reasons concerned the slow progress in the amelioration of the plight of depressed classes. The Untouchability Offence Act was enacted only in 1955. Reservations in education and employment did not seem adequate. Ambedkar’s fear of Hindu domination was further nurtured by the fact that in all elections to the reserved constituencies his own Scheduled Caste Federation later the Republican Party of India lost overwhelmingly to Congress backed candidates. Ambedkar himself was defeated in a bye-election in 1954 from a Bombay constituency by a Congress nominee.

Thus, though the problems of depressed classes, as put forth by Ambedkar may only be an indicator of the prevailing system and conditions of his times and not the exhaustive one and quite a few of them disappeared with the passage of time yet his ideas continued to guide the successive Governments in formulating the welfare policies for the depressed classes. A perusal of the schemes launched for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes discussed in the Chapter V clearly shows the impression of Ambedkar’s thoughts and ideas over them.