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Views of Gandhi and BR Ambedkar on Caste based separate electorate

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Why is in news? Why Gandhi opposed caste-based separate electorates

It was in this week, September 1932, at the **Yerawada Central Jail in Pune**, Gandhi began fasting unto death against the award of separate electorates to harijans.

This was an issue Gandhi had been vocal about and which brought him to loggerheads with the tallest leader of lower castes in the country — BR Ambedkar and **leads to Poona Pact**.

Separate electorate:

Separate Electorates are that type of elections in which **minorities select their own representatives separately**, as **opposed to Joint Electorates** where people are selected collectively.

When the British implemented the system of democracy in India in order to strength their rule, and to involve local people in government, the minorities and other depressed classes demanded separate electorates.

Gandhi's views on caste:

In his **early days**, Gandhi's views on caste were **extremely orthodox**: he supported prohibitions on inter-dining and inter-marriage, and held caste to be vital to Hinduism.

However, as he became the central figure in India's national movement, his views evolved, partially due to the nascent Dalit movement.

Gandhi began to **preach the gospel of unity and shunned untouchability**, referring to **untouchables as harijans** (children of God). "I do know that it [untouchability] is harmful both to spiritual and national good," **Gandhi wrote in 1936**.

However, Gandhi's **criticism of untouchability did not lead** to him **rejecting the institution of caste itself**, which, as Ambedkar put it, would require Gandhi to reject the very basis behind caste — the Hindu religion.

Ambedkar's views on caste:

Ambedkar's position was **far more radical than Gandhi** and other upper caste reformers like him. He saw this reformism as inadequate to undo millenia of discrimination.

According to him, any revolt against the caste system would only be possible after the **oppressed themselves rejected their condition** and oppression as being divinely ordained.

For Ambedkar, bringing an end to the caste system would only be possible if the **divine authority of the shastras (holy scriptures) was rejected first**.

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Thus, his political programme emphasised on lower castes obtaining political power. He suggested separate electorates as the form of affirmative action to empower lower castes.

Ambedkar's arguments for separate electorates:

Ambedkar said during the plenary session of the First Round Table Conference in London that “The **depressed classes form a group by themselves** which is distinct and separate and, although they are included among the Hindus, they in no sense form an integral part of that community”.

“The Depressed Classes feel that they **will get no shred of political power** unless the political machinery for the new constitution is of a special make,” he continued.

Separate electorates with double vote – one for SCs to vote for an SC candidate and the other for SCs to vote for in the general electorate.

While he had **previously rejected communal electorates** (i.e. separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims), his **position changed over time**, as he realised that while joint electorates might better help integrate lower castes into the Hindu fold, they would do little to challenge their subservient position.

He felt that the **system of unqualified joint electorates** “**enabled the majority to influence the election** of the representatives of the dalits community, and thus disabled them for defending the interests of their oppression against the ‘tyranny of the majority’”.

Gandhi's opposition:

Gandhi's opposition to **separate electorates was ostensibly** based on his view that they “**do too little**” for lower castes.

Gandhi argued that rather than being restricted to just this measly share of seats, lower castes should aspire to rule “**the kingdom of the whole world**”.

However, the reality of lower castes' material and social condition was not likely to put them in a position to rule the world.

Gandhi's opposition also stemmed from the **fear that separate electorates would “destroy Hinduism”** by driving a wedge within the community.

This was especially important for two strategic reasons - Gandhi rightly understood **how the British had exploited internal divisions in Indian society for their own purposes**. Separate electorates, according to him, would only help the British ‘divide and rule’.

This was **also a time when antagonism between Hindus and Muslims was rising**. If separate electorates for lower castes would be announced in addition to those for Muslims, this would significantly reduce the power that caste Hindu leadership enjoyed by breaking the consolidated Hindu fold.

Poona Pact, 1932:

In 1932, Gandhi began a fast unto death in the Yerawada Jail against the British decision to create separate electorates based on caste.

“This is a God-given opportunity that has come to me,” Gandhi said from his prison cell, “to offer my life as a final sacrifice to the downtrodden”.

With pressure from Gandhi, Ambedkar signed the historic Poona Pact in 1932.

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According to this pact, **Hindu joint electorate was retained** and **gave reserved seats to the depressed classes**.

It was signed by Ambedkar on behalf of the depressed classes and Madan Mohan Malviya on behalf of the Upper Caste Hindus.

Ambedkar was **never satisfied with the outcome** of the Poona pact.

Conclusion:

Many people around the world have tremendous regard for these two people and have also voiced criticism. In addition to aiding in India's independence, they worked to solve the social issues of the day. The issues that the lower castes were recognized by both of them and they assisted in their empowerment.

They made an effort to alter the existing systems and guide India's development. They had different strategies for getting rid of untouchability, despite agreeing that it was the main problem facing the social order. Additionally, they cleared the ground for India's independence.