

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Poona Pact, Indian National Congress and the descriptive and substantive representation of Dalits in colonial India

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Abstract

Within the prevailing historiographical tradition of modern India, critics see the Poona Pact as having “disenfranchised” Dalits, which they attribute to the fact that, due to the numerical superiority of caste Hindus, the implementation of joint electorates resulted in the consolidation of power within the Indian National Congress: the party that, critics allege, protected the interests of the caste Hindu community. Critics further argue that Dalit candidates who successfully ran for office under the Congress party’s banner, garnering support mostly from caste Hindu voters, failed to speak for the interests of the Dalit community effectively. This article examines the returns of the provincial assembly elections held in 1936–1937 and 1945–1946, as well as the functioning of the Congress ministries in the provinces of British India between 1937 and 1939 and 1946 and 1947 to challenge the criticisms mentioned above and to argue that the inclusion of reserved seats, primary elections, and cumulative voting mechanisms had a significant role in enhancing the potential of the Poona Pact to ensure genuine descriptive representation of Dalits. The article also finds that the affiliation of Dalit legislators with the Congress party had a beneficial impact on their substantive representation in the provincial legislatures where the Congress formed ministries because Dalit interests and the ideological and programmatic dynamics of the Congress party were congruent. In this context, Gandhi, a member of the caste Hindu community, played the role of a “critical actor” who encouraged the Congress party to undertake measures to advance the interests of the Dalit community. Moreover, a powerful and autonomous anti-untouchability movement led by the Harijan Sevak Sangh played a crucial role in enhancing the institutional capabilities of the Congress governments, enabling them to effectively address the concerns and challenges faced by the Dalit community, which further bolstered the substantive representation of Dalits.

Keywords: Ambedkar; critical actor; Dalit; descriptive representation; Gandhi; Harijan Sevak Sangh; Indian National Congress; Poona Pact; substantive representation

Introduction

Caste Hindu and Dalit leaders saw the Poona Pact reached on 24 September 1932 between Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and afterwards endorsed by the British colonial government as a resolution to the prolonged debate around the issue of Dalit representation in legislative assemblies.[†] However, the contentious issue of using separate or joint electorates as competing methods for electing Dalits to different representative institutions in British India persisted as a subject of controversy until India achieved independence.¹ In a memorandum presented to the Constituent

[†]I have used the anachronistic term ‘Dalit’ throughout the article, except when in quotations.

¹Ambedkar 1945a; Ambedkar 1947.

Assembly in 1947, Ambedkar advocated for eliminating the joint electorate system for Dalits established by the Poona Pact. Instead, he proposed implementing a separate electorate system to protect the Dalit community.² According to Ambedkar, in a joint electorate system, the representative of the Dalit community would serve as a nominal representative rather than as a person who truly represented them because a Dalit candidate who did not conform to the interests of the caste Hindu community and act as a tool to further their agenda would face significant challenges in being elected³ since caste Hindu voters, who typically constituted a majority, held considerable influence in the electoral process, while Dalit voters, who were generally in the minority, had limited political leverage. Ambedkar expressed concerns about the voting power imbalance between Dalits and caste Hindus, which he anticipated would persist even with the implementation of adult suffrage.⁴ As a result, he saw implementing a separate electorate system as the only means to ensure genuine representation for the Dalit community.⁵ A separate electorate referred to an electoral system in which only Dalit voters would be eligible to participate in electing a representative from the Dalit community to the legislative assemblies. Thus, Ambedkar advocated for establishing a separate electorate system whereby Dalits would have the ability to elect a representative whom they completely trusted and who would possess the autonomy to advocate for the rights of Dalits inside legislative assemblies.⁶

Modern academic discourse has shown a notable inclination towards drawing extensively on the literary works of Ambedkar. According to Sukhadeo Thorat's analysis, the disenfranchisement of Dalits was a consequence of the Poona Pact that implemented a joint electorate system for political reservation, which, in practice, significantly limited the ability of Dalits to elect candidates of their preference to both the national and state legislatures. Thorat highlights the potential risks of this arrangement since the reserved constituencies mainly consisted of a sizeable high-caste population, resulting in the high-caste community being able to choose Dalit representatives.⁷ Similarly, David Hardiman argues that the political goals of Dalits, who constituted a minority group, would be overshadowed by the dominant political agenda of the caste Hindu majority.⁸ Perry Anderson also agrees with the viewpoint that in legislatures, Dalits chosen by the broader Hindu population rather than by their group undermined the political autonomy of the Dalit community by allowing the Congress party to select representatives who aligned with its interests.⁹ Arundhati Roy concurs that Dalit candidates experienced a loss of political influence due to the need to gain acceptance from their constituencies controlled by caste Hindus.¹⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, like Ambedkar, sees implementing a separate electorate system for Dalits as a potential solution, which he believed would empower Dalits by providing them with their elected representatives, thereby enabling them to establish a significant presence in the political arena. According to Jaffrelot, the provision of reserved seats in joint electorates created the potential for upper caste-dominated parties to co-opt Dalits by distributing electoral tickets to them, even in cases where this contradicted the preferences of the local Dalit population.¹¹ In his examination of the operational dimension of the Poona Pact for Dalits, Raja Sekhar Vundru also asserts that the joint electorate system had proven ineffective in guaranteeing, let alone advancing, the genuine representation of Dalits through the election of Dalit representatives from reserved electoral constituencies to the national and state assemblies. He asserts that a significant need existed to modify the joint electorate system, thereby altering the complexion of political representatives for

²Ambedkar 1947, p. 22.

³Ambedkar 1943b, pp. 34–35.

⁴Ambedkar 1947, p. 45.

⁵Ambedkar 1943b, pp. 32–33.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷Thorat 2022, p. 98.

⁸Hardiman 2003, p. 131.

⁹Anderson 2012, p. 41.

¹⁰Roy 2014, p. 127.

¹¹Jaffrelot 2005, p. 54.

the Dalit community. As a result, Vundru strongly supports Ambedkar's demand for a "separate electorate" or "percentage-based qualified joint electorate" for Dalits.¹²

In sum, Ambedkar and the later critics attribute the disenfranchisement of Dalits to the Poona Pact because the implementation of joint electorates, due to the numerical superiority of caste Hindus, resulted in the consolidation of power among caste Hindus represented by the Indian National Congress.¹³ According to them, Dalit candidates who ran for office under the Congress party's banner and secured their positions with the support of caste Hindu voters failed to effectively speak for the interests of the Dalit community because Dalit legislators affiliated with the Congress party faced conflicting pressures inside legislative assemblies. The Congress party, critics allege, pressured Dalit legislators to focus only on improving Dalits' living conditions rather than actively addressing untouchability, as taking action against untouchability would have led to a decline in the popularity of the Congress party among caste Hindus.¹⁴

This article examines the returns of the 1936–1937 and 1945–1946 electoral processes for the provincial legislatures in British India and the functioning of the Congress ministries during the periods from 1937 to 1939 and 1946 to 1947 to challenge the criticisms mentioned above and to argue that the implementation of reserved seats, primary elections, and cumulative voting mechanisms played a significant role in enhancing the potential of the Poona Pact to ensure genuine descriptive representation of Dalits. The article also shows that the affiliation of Dalit legislators with the Congress party had a favourable impact on their substantive representation in the provincial legislatures where the Congress formed ministries because Dalit interests and the ideological and programmatic dynamics of the Congress party were congruent. In this context, Gandhi, a member of the caste Hindu community, played the role of a "critical actor"¹⁵ who encouraged the Congress party to undertake measures to advance the interests of the Dalit community. Moreover, the emergence of a powerful and autonomous anti-untouchability movement organised by the Harijan Sevak Sangh further bolstered the substantive representation of Dalits. The anti-untouchability movement played a pivotal role in enhancing the institutional capabilities of the Congress governments in the various provinces, enabling them to effectively address the concerns and challenges faced by the Dalit community.

Role of electoral systems in safeguarding Dalit interests

In British India, Ambedkar emerged as the preeminent advocate for establishing separate electoral representation for Dalits. However, a simplistic pursuit of identity politics did not drive him to advocate a separate political representation of Dalits in legislative assemblies. Instead, it served as a crucial mechanism for the transformational politics that he envisaged. Ambedkar expressed concurrence with the nationalist criticism of the British government's assertion that the provision of "good government" would adequately address the needs of Indians. However, he had reservations about the nationalist perspective on "self-government" and "democracy," deeming it limited in scope and discriminatory. The nationalist perspective on self-government and democracy was limited in vision since it primarily saw democracy as a governmental structure without fully recognising the need to cultivate a democratic society to uphold it. In essence, the advocates of self-government were pursuing political independence without acknowledging the inherent inequalities ingrained in society due to the caste system and the practice of untouchability. Similarly, the nationalist understanding of self-government and democracy was characterised by exclusion since it failed to address or only superficially recognised the challenges and concerns of Dalits, often adopting a condescending and assimilationist approach.

¹²Vundru 2019, p. 29.

¹³Ambedkar 1943b, p. 35.

¹⁴Ambedkar 1945b, pp. 24, 141; Anderson 2012, p. 41; Hardiman 2003, p. 131; Jaffrelot 2005, p. 54; Roy 2014, p. 127, p. 605; Thorat 2022, p. 91; Vundru 2019, p. 29.

¹⁵Childs and Krook 2006.

Ambedkar conceptualised a democratic society with an associated living, whereby people, especially Dalits, would engage in open and equitable communication and active social participation.¹⁶

Ambedkar believed that to achieve his vision of a society based on democracy or associated living, it was necessary to accurately identify and acknowledge all prevailing forms of unfreedoms, inequalities, and obstacles to communication and social participation experienced by specific population groups. In this context, he identified caste and, more specifically, the practice of untouchability as the primary impediment to achieving an associated living.¹⁷ Within this particular framework, Ambedkar posited that the fundamental characteristic of a collective or societal entity was the presence of “like-mindedness” among its constituents. To him, the development of like-mindedness among individuals within a group depended on physical closeness, active communication, and engagement in shared activities. As a result, Ambedkar asserted that Dalits were a distinct social group characterised by their unique like-mindedness. Due to the enforced segregation of Dalits, their like-mindedness remained confined to their community without being extended to other social groups, even caste Hindus who, driven by political motives, sought to categorise Dalits as Hindus.¹⁸

In this context, Ambedkar argued that the concept of good representation has two essential components: the “representation of opinions” and the “representation of persons” or “personal representation.”¹⁹ The absence of Dalit representatives chosen by Dalits in legislative assemblies resulted in their denial of personal representation. Ambedkar’s concept of personal representation manifested his support for popular self-government and the fundamental notion that each individual should have significance within a representative democratic system. Personal representation assures individuals the right to choose a representative to advocate for their interests inside legislative assemblies. Personal representation also has a crucial role in highlighting the expressive significance of seeing one’s individuality inside legislative bodies, either directly or indirectly, by the presence of individuals who share similar characteristics and beliefs or who are like-minded. In a social milieu characterised by strong group ties, whereby each group has its own set of shared beliefs and maintains limited interaction with other groups, personal identity is contingent upon group membership. Individuals are more likely to perceive aspects of themselves reflected in a person of the same group.²⁰

Ambedkar’s concept of personal representation, therefore, encompassed a framework that emphasised the representative’s “persona.” The social milieu in which a person grows up and his lived experiences make his persona. Representing a group necessitates the presence of an individual who embodies the group’s persona. The concept of personal representation entails the ability of individuals to see their interests and values reflected in legislative assemblies via the presence of representatives who share similar characteristics and beliefs. Given the enforced segregation experienced by the Dalit community, their collective consciousness and shared perspectives are primarily exclusive to their community, and only a member of the Dalit community has the requisite understanding and insight to represent and advocate for Dalit ideas and interests effectively. Ambedkar posited that those belonging to the caste Hindu community would lack the ability to speak for Dalits because they subjected Dalits to the discriminatory practice of untouchability inside the caste-based social hierarchy. Speaking for another individual necessitates a shared set of beliefs and perspectives, or like-mindedness, between the speaker and the represented one. The development of like-mindedness occurs due to engaging in communication and participating in everyday activities. Ambedkar highlighted the lack of communication that existed between Dalits and caste Hindus. In addition, to authentically speak for or act on behalf of a group, it is necessary to have the “lived experience” of that group. Ambedkar, therefore, underscored the importance of the representative’s “epistemic”²¹ value, or how well they knew their constituency, in his concept of personal representation. Moreover, the presence of Dalits, whom

¹⁶Ambedkar 1943a, pp. 35–36.

¹⁷Ambedkar 1979, pp. 249–250.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 248–250.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 250–252.

²¹Williams 1998, pp. 133, 193.

caste Hindus see and consider as individuals with lower social status and as impure and subhuman, inside a public domain such as legislative assemblies might be a significant step towards recognising their legal and moral personhood. According to Ambedkar, personal representation in legislative bodies in this context humanises individuals belonging to the Dalit community.²²

Ambedkar recommended the implementation of reserved seats in separate electorates as mechanisms to provide personal representation for the excluded, disenfranchised and oppressed Dalit communities.²³ His objective in advocating for group representation was not to exacerbate or perpetuate pre-existing differences. Instead, he intended to foster the emergence of a different and collective “like-mindedness” by allowing the expression of diverse “like-mindedness” within legislative assemblies. The new social union envisioned would serve as a complement to the political union. Therefore, the pursuit of separate representation was motivated by the intention not to solidify pre-existing group identities but rather to facilitate their transformation and the establishment of new social identities so that people can engage in unrestricted and equitable interactions.²⁴ Moreover, Ambedkar maintained that the need for separate representation did not primarily pertain to historically dominant communities but those on the periphery who faced challenges securing adequate personal representation. According to him, Dalits constituted a unique and historically significant group whose particular identity was rooted in a past characterised by oppression, marginalisation, and exclusion. Thus, his primary rationale for advocating a separate representation of Dalits rested upon a strong foundation rooted in a historical context characterised by systematic oppression and marginalisation, further perpetuated by the existing discriminatory structures.²⁵ The establishment of separate political representation for Dalits served not only as a mechanism to attain “personal representation” for Dalits²⁶ but also as a tool to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups such as Dalits in legislative bodies, which was particularly important as these groups faced challenges in securing electoral success through conventional means. The objective was to create an environment where Dalits could effectively engage and participate on an equitable footing with representatives from other groups.²⁷

Ambedkar aspired to transform the divergent like-mindedness of diverse groups comprising a political entity into a cohesive social entity. He espoused the notion that converting political alliances into social ones was not only feasible but also imperative for ensuring the durability of the political order. Ambedkar attributed the persistence of disputes inside a political union to the lack, or limited extent, of communication across diverse social groupings, which stemmed from their divergent like-mindedness. He also attributed the persistence of this phenomenon to the hierarchical relationships among some groups within a system characterised by dominance and hegemony, similar to the circumstances seen in India’s caste system. These obstacles impeded a political union from fully achieving its potential. To Ambedkar, political cooperation must evolve into a cohesive social entity to achieve its utmost capabilities. It was in this context that he advocated for the concept of re-socialisation of the prevailing social attitudes. For Ambedkar, it was plausible to foster a transformation in the perspectives held by different groups towards one another by proactively engaging in conversation, discussion, and participating in mutually shared activities. He saw legislative bodies as places that provided opportunities for people to communicate with one another and take part in democratic processes. However, it was imperative to establish specific mechanisms to enable the representation of marginalised Dalit communities, who could not access these legislative bodies via conventional means, to facilitate this process. As soon as members of these legislative bodies discussed their perspectives and worked together to formulate a plan to take action for the political union, a new kind of associated living would emerge. The collective activities undertaken inside legislatures would contribute to the development of associated living, subsequently influencing the broader social environment outside the

²²Ambedkar 1982, p. 255.

²³Ambedkar 1979, p. 252.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 266–267.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁷Ambedkar 1943a, pp. 35–36.

legislative sphere. Ambedkar envisioned a society where individuals would engage in a re-socialised associated living, where dialogue and collective action would rebuild the existing attitudes of different groups towards one another. One way the transformation might take place was by ensuring personal representation for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups by implementing group representation mechanisms. However, pursuing personal representation for underprivileged and vulnerable groups should not be seen as a strategy to perpetuate existing social identities or engage in identity politics. Thus, the emergence of a new associated living presents the prospects for new community identities and collectives to engage in mutual active interactions characterised by freedom and equality.²⁸

Nevertheless, Ambedkar exercised prudence in endorsing the idea of a separate electorate system for specific groups. He acknowledged that implementing separate electorates could exacerbate communal divisions, highlighting one of his concerns over providing separate electorates specifically for Muslims.²⁹ He expressed another concern over implementing separate electorates, which was the potential for legislators elected under this system to influence laws about their communities and the broader society.³⁰ Such a scenario would contradict the principle of governance based on consent since it would include representatives who had not obtained the approval of the whole populace, resulting in a limited number of individuals making legislative decisions on all topics relevant to the entire society. Ambedkar contended that providing separate electorates to “special interest” groups, including landowners, trade, and commerce, would give rise to substantial obstacles. He claimed that the proponents of these powerful interests often impeded the advancement of progressive initiatives due to their inclination towards particularistic thought processes. According to him, implementing separate electorates should be considered an exceptional measure, intended only as a temporary solution for addressing the severe conditions of Dalits, who suffered extensive oppression and persecution. But Dalit lawmakers must go beyond advocating and working just for their community and should consider the broader society.³¹

Within this particular framework, it therefore becomes vital to emphasise the character traits of the representatives, namely their inclination towards service-oriented behaviour and adherence to moral principles. The emphasis placed by Gandhi on the qualities of the representative serves as a complementary notion to Ambedkar’s concept of personal representation for Dalits. Gandhi believed that the capacity to advocate for others was contingent both on the speaker’s social background and ethical disposition. Gandhi’s concept of the representative emphasises the significance of empathy, service-mindedness, and love. These qualities are essential for a representative to transcend self-centred objectives and prioritise the greater good. Gandhi stressed the need for empathy, defined as the ability to put oneself in another person’s shoes.³² Cultivating empathy is crucial for acquiring knowledge about interests that extend beyond the boundaries of one’s social group. Gandhi’s emphasis on the empathic nature of the representative reinforces the significant epistemic element inherent in Ambedkar’s conception of good representation and legislation. It would also be beneficial for voters to consider not only the “like-mindedness” between themselves and a particular candidate but also the personal qualities and integrity of their potential representative, which can serve as a means to alleviate the detrimental effects of power struggles, self-centred actions, and the prevalence of identity-based politics that afflict modern representative democracies. Thus, to Gandhi, good political representation centres on a good legislator who embodies selflessness and a commitment to serving others.

Ambedkar believed that implementing a joint electorate system served as a means for caste Hindus to choose a representative from the Dalit community who would be suitable to the caste Hindu community instead of someone who would advocate for the welfare and concerns of Dalits. According to him, Dalit candidates can act as representatives of the Dalit community if they have achieved success

²⁸ Ambedkar 1979, pp. 266–267.

²⁹ Ambedkar 1979, p. 252.

³⁰ Ambedkar 1982, p. 355.

³¹ Ambedkar 1979, p. 256.

³² Jahanbegloo 2023.

in the final run-off election solely through the support of Dalit voters.³³ Thus, Ambedkar asserted that only implementing separate electorates would be a reliable and effective means to guarantee the election of authentic and autonomous Dalit representatives, thereby minimising the risk of manipulation or deceit.³⁴ Furthermore, Ambedkar argued that the mere inclusion of Dalits in legislative assemblies would not be enough to provide them with adequate personal representation. It was also essential for their presence and voice to impact the decisions arrived at in the legislatures. In this context, the personal representation of Dalits based on their demographic percentage implied the perpetuation of their minority status, depriving them of the requisite authority to influence the majority's decisions and actions.³⁵ In contrast, Ambedkar proposed a system known as "weightage" or "overrepresentation," which included a decrease in the allocation of seats for the caste Hindu community while still maintaining their majority representation and an augmentation in the total number of seats for Dalits.³⁶

However, J.A. Laponce highlights the potential dangers of overrepresentation or weightage for minorities since the majority group is unlikely to consent to relinquish its majority status inside legislatures. The overrepresentation of a minority group will gradually increase their representation inside decision-making bodies without ever fully granting them a majority status. Weightage can potentially enhance the negotiating power of minority groups, but it may also have unintended consequences. To Laponce, the closer minority groups achieve a majority representation in legislatures, the more threatening they will be from the majority group's perspective. The majority group may enhance its cohesiveness and consistently adopt an anti-minority stance on all issues. Laponce points to the correlation between the overrepresentation of Muslims in legislatures and the escalating hostility between Hindus and Muslims in India.³⁷

Moreover, J.A. Laponce argues that a social group should reject separate electorates due to the availability of other methods that may achieve identical outcomes without the drawback of dividing the political entity into distinct communal factions.³⁸ The other electoral methods mentioned by Laponce include the primary election system and the allocation of reserved seats established under the Poona Pact, which empowered Dalits by allowing them to elect their representatives.³⁹ To Gail Omvedt, Ambedkar demonstrated contentment with the Poona Pact, mainly due to the inclusion of the primary elections, which seemed to provide Dalits with an opportunity for independent representation.⁴⁰ Gandhi, in response to some of the criticisms on this matter, also said,

"In regard to elections, I would endorse your fears if you were at the mercy of caste Hindus. You fear that a person who had almost sold himself to caste Hindus might be elected. But such a man would be prevented from being elected under the new scheme. The first choice will be yours. A person whom you do not choose will not be elected. Whoever is elected will be your nominee None will be elected who does not command, irrespective of caste Hindu votes, a large number of your own votes."⁴¹

Furthermore, Laponce asserts that it is impossible to definitively claim that a particular electoral system would consistently safeguard the interests of minority groups while disregarding the potential benefits of alternative electoral systems.⁴² In a similar vein, Prakash Ambedkar, a prominent Dalit political figure in India and the grandson of Ambedkar contends that the inclusion of Dalits in

³³ Ambedkar 1945b, p. 157.

³⁴ Ambedkar 1947, p. 45.

³⁵ Ambedkar 1982, p. 252.

³⁶ Ambedkar 1947, pp. 43–44.

³⁷ Laponce 1957, pp. 323–324, 338.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

⁴⁰ Omvedt 2004, p. 48.

⁴¹ Shukla 1949, p. 78.

⁴² Laponce 1957, p. 318.

legislatures, whether through joint or separate electorates, does not guarantee the emergence of independent Dalit representatives and leaders⁴³ due to a multitude of factors such as party affiliations, institutional norms, lack of legislative experience, and the influence of the external political landscape, all of which primarily affect the process of representation.⁴⁴

The Poona Pact and the political representation of Dalits

The electoral provisions established by the Poona Pact consisted of implementing reserved seats within joint electorates, adopting cumulative voting, and establishing an election process comprising primary and final elections. The Poona Pact allocated 148 reserved seats for Dalits in joint electorates,⁴⁵ significantly increasing the seventy-one seats the Communal Award had previously granted them.⁴⁶ The practice of reserved seats included the limitation of candidature for those seats exclusively to individuals from the Dalit community. By reserving seats in legislatures for people of the Dalit caste, only members of that community could run for election in such reserved seats. Eleanor Zelliott argues that primary elections, exclusively designed for Dalit voters, substituted separate electorates granted in the Communal Award.⁴⁷ The intention of implementing primary elections was to guarantee that the candidates elected to occupy the seats reserved for Dalits in the final run-off elections have the support and trust of a significant portion of their community.⁴⁸ The implementation of primary elections was a compromise made in response to the demands of the proponents of separate electorates like Ambedkar. Implementing joint electorates during the run-off elections, in which both Dalit and caste Hindu voters would participate, was to foster a stronger bond and affiliation between these two communities. The decision was a concession to those who advocated for implementing joint electorates for Dalits.⁴⁹

The election system implemented for Dalits was known as the system of joint electorates with reservation of seats. The joint electorate represented all eligible voters. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the joint electorate did not include the whole of eligible voters. The British government had granted separate electorates to various religious and ethnic groups, including Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans. As a result, electoral rules disenfranchised those belonging to the Muslim, Sikh, Indian Christian, Anglo-Indian, and European communities from participating in a joint electorate system. The outcome was the establishment of a joint electorate, whereby the constituency included only eligible voters from the Dalit community, caste Hindus, Parsis, and Jews. The joint electorate mainly included caste Hindus and Dalits, with Parsis and Jews being of little presence, primarily limited to Bombay. Furthermore, the joint electorate was a multi-member electorate. In a joint electorate, the government mandated reserving at least one seat for a particular social group. Consequently, the eligibility to run as a candidate for the reserved seat was limited only to those belonging to that community. Although the eligibility to run for office in the joint electorate with a reserved seat was limited, the right to vote remained unrestricted, which meant that all eligible voters in the joint electorate, regardless of their community affiliation, were able to participate freely in the election process and cast their votes for candidates competing for the reserved seat. The procedure for announcing the outcome of the election for the reserved seat stipulated that whether the election featured only one candidate representing the group for whom the government had reserved the seat or if there were many candidates, the election officer announced the candidate who received the highest total of votes as the elected candidate.⁵⁰

⁴³Guru 2017, pp. 97, 100.

⁴⁴Childs and Krook 2008.

⁴⁵Ambedkar 1947, pp. 54–55.

⁴⁶House of Commons 1932.

⁴⁷Zelliott 2013, p. 139.

⁴⁸Char 1942, p. 270.

⁴⁹Char 1942, p. 270.

⁵⁰Ambedkar 1945b, pp. 150–153.

There were two rounds of voting for the reserved seats for Dalits in the Poona Pact. The first round was for the primary elections, and the second round was for the final polls. During the primary elections, the electorate consisted of Dalits duly registered on the electoral rolls of the general constituencies. The voting procedure used was that of the single non-transferable vote. The primary voters chose four candidates for each reserved seat. The election process for the panel was via separate electorates, whereby only Dalit voters were eligible to participate. If fewer than four candidates were vying for a reserved seat, there was no need for a primary election, and all the contenders were declared elected. During the subsequent phase, referred to as the final electoral stage, only those candidates elected by the primary electors were deemed qualified to compete for the seats allocated for those belonging to the Dalit community. The final elections saw collective participation in the voting process, as caste Hindu and Dalit voters used their right to vote in unison. The Indian Delimitation Committee made a recommendation for the use of cumulative voting in the final elections. It noted that the cumulative voting mechanism afforded voters unrestricted autonomy in expressing their preferences and determined that it did not violate the principles outlined in the Poona Pact. In a cumulative voting system, each voter has votes equal to the seats available in a constituency. The voter can allocate all their votes to a single candidate or share them among multiple candidates according to their preference.⁵¹

The Government of India Act 1935 included most of the terms outlined in the Poona Pact but with minor modifications. The only change that occurred was a direct consequence of incorporating the newly formed province of Orissa. The territorial division of the region known as Bihar and Orissa Province resulted in the creation of two distinct administrative entities, namely Bihar Province and Orissa Province. In the undivided Bihar and Orissa Province, the Poona Pact had initially reserved eighteen seats for individuals belonging to the Dalit community. However, the Act of 1935 modified the allocation of these seats, with fifteen seats being exclusively set aside for Dalits in Bihar, while six seats went to Dalits in Orissa. Consequently, the seats reserved for Dalits increased from 148 to 151. The Act also allowed Dalits to participate in electoral contests for the unreserved seats in general constituencies, and the expanded suffrage provided by the Act enhanced their likelihood of achieving victory (Table 1).

Ambedkar explained that due to the electoral process for the panel of four being via separate electorates including only Dalit voters, the presence of a single Dalit candidate in the panel would result in their being the most ardent advocate for Dalit interests while simultaneously being seen as the least favourable option from the perspective of caste Hindus. In a scenario where two Dalit candidates were present on the panel, the second candidate would exhibit a lesser degree of staunchness compared to the first candidate. Consequently, the second candidate would be seen favourably by those belonging to the caste Hindu community. In another scenario, when a panel consisted of three Dalit candidates, the third candidate would exhibit a lesser degree of staunchness compared to the second candidate. As a result, from the perspective of caste Hindus, the third candidate would be seen as more favourable. In yet another scenario, when a panel comprised of four Dalit candidates, the fourth candidate would exhibit a lesser degree of staunchness compared to the third candidate. Consequently, the fourth candidate would be the most favourable choice from the perspective of those in the caste Hindu community. Therefore, to Ambedkar, a panel of four Dalit candidates in the final elections would allow caste Hindus to choose Dalit representatives most compatible with the needs and preferences of the caste Hindu community. However, including a Dalit nominee of the caste Hindu community on the panel of four would only be possible if the number of candidates vying for a seat exceeded four.⁵²

Did the Poona Pact result in the disenfranchisement of Dalits?

The Poona Pact aimed to achieve two primary objectives, that is, ensuring the election of a panel consisting of four Dalit candidates through the direct participation of Dalit voters in the primary elections

⁵¹Indian Delimitation Committee 1936, Vol. 1, pp. 18–22.

⁵²Ambedkar 1945b, p. 92.

Table 1. Seats in provincial legislative assemblies⁵³

Provinces	Total strength of the legislative assembly	General seats	Seats reserved for Dalits
Madras	215	146	30
Bengal	250	78	30
United Provinces	228	140	20
Central Provinces & Berar	112	84	20
Bombay	175	114	15
Bihar	152	85	15
Punjab	175	42	08
Assam	108	47	07
Orissa	60	44	06
Sind	60	18	00
North-West Frontier Province	50	09	00
Total	1585	808	151

and the influential and active involvement of caste Hindu voters in electing Dalit legislators in the final polls. However, during the provincial legislative elections of 1936–1937, the electoral process did not successfully realise these objectives. Primary elections took place in a mere thirty-one out of 151 seats reserved for Dalits. In the remaining seats, the total number of candidates participating in the primary voting process did not surpass four. Thus, primary voting did not occur in 120 seats due to insufficient candidates vying for a reserved seat, which fell below the required minimum of four candidates to be elected. The absence of primary elections alleviated concerns over Dalit candidates receiving the fewest Dalit votes in these reserved seats and securing victory in the final polls via the support of caste Hindu voters. In the seats mentioned above, the likelihood of caste Hindus voting for Dalit candidates from the initial panel of four, who would be amenable to serving the interests of the caste Hindus, was, thus, non-existent in the final elections (Table 2).

Furthermore, extensive evidence indicates that in several instances, within constituencies consisting of two or more seats, voters belonging to the caste Hindu community displayed a complete absence of enthusiasm for electing candidates from the Dalit community. In several seats that adopted the cumulative voting system, voters belonging to the caste Hindu community used their prerogative to abstain from voting for Dalit candidates, instead allocating all of their votes to candidates from the caste Hindu community. As a result, it was seen in Bihar that Dalit candidates who achieved victory in two-member seats did not earn an estimated half of the total votes cast, nor did they obtain votes proportional to the voting power of the Dalit community. The situation in the Central Provinces was comparable to that in Bihar.⁵⁴ The disinterest exhibited by voters belonging to the caste Hindu community towards the election of candidates from the Dalit community was not only officially documented but also informally acknowledged during a meeting of anti-untouchability reform activists in Western and Central India, presided over by Rameshwari Nehru in June 1939 (Table 3).⁵⁵

In the final elections, not a single caste Hindu elector cast their votes for twenty-eight Dalit candidates in Bengal, eighteen Dalit candidates in Madras, sixteen Dalit candidates in the Central Provinces and Berar, nine Dalit candidates in the United Provinces, twelve Dalit candidates in

⁵³Government of India 1936, p. 245.

⁵⁴Reforms Office (Reforms) 1936a, File No. 20/III/1936 F.

⁵⁵*Harijan*, 5 August 1939.

Table 2. Number of seats in which primary elections took place⁵⁶

Province	Number of seats reserved for Dalits	Number of seats in which primary elections took place
Bengal	30	07
Madras	30	06
Central Provinces & Berar	20	05
United Provinces	20	10
Bihar	15	00
Bombay	15	02
Punjab	08	00
Assam	07	01
Orissa	06	00
Total	151	31

Table 3. Successful Dalit candidates with zero caste Hindu votes⁵⁷

Province	Number of seats reserved for Dalits	Successful Dalit candidates with zero caste Hindu votes in the final election
Bengal	30	28
Madras	30	18
Central Provinces & Berar	20	16
United Provinces	20	09
Bihar	15	12
Bombay	15	09
Punjab	08	08
Assam	07	05
Orissa	06	04
Total	151	110

Bihar, nine Dalit candidates in Bombay, eight Dalit candidates in Punjab, five Dalit candidates in Assam, and four Dalit candidates in Orissa. Put differently, one hundred ten candidates from the Dalit community received votes solely from Dalit voters. Following Ambedkar, one may argue that these elected Dalit candidates would genuinely speak for the interests of the Dalit community. Thus, the outcome of the provincial elections held from 1936 to 1937 refuted Ambedkar's concerns about the potential marginalisation of Dalits within the context of joint electorates, where they feared being overwhelmed by the caste Hindu majority. The implementation of cumulative voting and the limited engagement of voters from the caste Hindu community in the electoral process of Dalits led to the *de facto* establishment of separate electorates inside the framework of joint electorates.

The voting behaviour of caste Hindus might be elucidated by considering Ambedkar's analysis of the functioning of the electoral system in the colonial era. Ambedkar refuted the concerns expressed by Muslims over their limited voting power compared to caste Hindus since Muslims anticipated that

⁵⁶Reforms Office (Reforms) 1936a, File No. 20/III/1936 F; 1936b, File No. 20/IV/1936 F.

⁵⁷Ambedkar 1945b, pp. 367–375.

such disparity would result in those Muslim legislators, who would be subservient to caste Hindu interests, getting elected with the help of caste Hindu votes. He rejected such a possibility and stated,

“If the mass of the non-Muslim voters were engaged in electing a Mohamedan candidate, the result anticipated by the Mohamedans may perhaps come true if the non-Muslims are bent on mischief. But the fact is that at the time of general election there will be many non-Mohamedan candidates standing for election. That being the case, the full force of all the non-Muslim voters will not be directed on the Mohamedan candidates. Nor will the non-Mohamedan candidates allow the non-Mohamedan voters to waste their votes by concentrating themselves on the Mohamedan candidates. On the contrary, they will engage many voters, if not all, for themselves. If this analysis is true, then it follows that very few non-Mohamedan voters will be left to participate in the election of the Mohamedan candidates, and that the fear of the Mohamedans of any mass action against Muslim candidates by non-Muslim voters is ... a hallucination.”⁵⁸

Similarly, during the provincial elections of 1936–1937, the presence of candidates from the caste Hindu community resulted in a dispersion of the collective voting power of caste Hindu voters, diluting their votes for Dalit candidates. The candidates from the caste Hindu community prevented caste Hindu voters from squandering their ballots by focusing on Dalits. They actively sought the support of a significant number of the caste Hindu electorate, if not the whole, to secure victory in the provincial elections.

In addition, the statistical information acquired during the final polls in 1936–1937 makes it abundantly evident that the cumulative voting method made it feasible for Dalits to elect their candidates in legislatures. The impact of the cumulative voting system was significant in the context of Bombay. Bombay’s electoral constituencies had a multi-member system, often consisting of three or four seats. Conversely, such constituencies were mainly limited to two seats in the other provinces. Thus, the Dalit community in Bombay had a higher degree of electoral influence than their counterparts in the other provinces. In Bombay, every eligible voter was allocated a certain number of votes, often ranging from three to four, based on the number of candidates the voter had to elect in a particular election. The voter could allocate all their votes to a single candidate or divide their votes among the contenders in any way they choose. Ambedkar’s Independent Labour Party demonstrated notable organisational prowess, as evidenced by their ability to secure ten seats out of the fifteen seats reserved for Dalits in Bombay and three unreserved seats in the open contest. Ambedkar’s success was due to the utilisation of the cumulative voting system, wherein Dalit voters strategically allocated their votes to Dalit candidates of their preference during the final elections. Additionally, the lack of enthusiasm among caste Hindu voters towards the election of Dalit candidates further facilitated Ambedkar’s electoral achievements.

The provincial legislative election conducted between 1936 and 1937 under the Government of India Act 1935 presented Dalits with an unprecedented prospect to exercise their voting rights and elect their members to legislative assemblies. The Act of 1935 made provisions to reserve seats for individuals belonging to the Dalit community to address the issue of representation and social inclusion. The Act allocated these reserved seats in two-member and multi-member constituencies with the general unreserved seats. Dalit candidates participated in the electoral process by contesting for the reserved seats under the banner of the Indian National Congress, as well as other small political parties, and as Independent candidates. Among the total 151 reserved seats designated for Dalits, the Congress party participated in electoral contests for 139 seats, while parties and people outside the Congress vied for 137 seats. Among the twenty-six seats not subjected to an election, the Congress party emerged victorious in fourteen. In comparison, the non-Congress parties secured the remaining twelve seats.⁵⁹ The absence of competition in twenty-six electoral constituencies indicated the political underdevelopment experienced by the Dalit community. There were 151 seats up for election, and the

⁵⁸ Ambedkar 1982, pp. 353–354.

⁵⁹ Ambedkar 1945b, p. 160.

non-Congress parties won seventy-three of those seats. The Congress party won seventy-eight of the seats.⁶⁰ The Independent Labour Party led by Ambedkar achieved electoral success by securing ten seats out of the fifteen reserved seats designated for specific constituencies in Bombay.⁶¹ But Ambedkar expressed dismay upon the British government declaring the outcome of the 1936–1937 elections thus:

“The [Indian National] Congress, in capturing [seventy-eight] seats, left only [seventy-three] seats to be filled by true and independent representatives of the Untouchables. The Untouchables were worse off under the Poona Pact than they would have been under the Prime Minister’s [Communal] Award. In point of effective representation, the Untouchables got less than what the Prime Minister had given them.”⁶²

Ambedkar posited that the acquisition of Dalit reserved seats by the Congress party, made possible by the votes of caste Hindu electors, had a detrimental impact on the welfare of Dalits.⁶³ He deemed it inappropriate for a Dalit candidate, whose electoral success was primarily due to caste Hindu votes, to claim to represent the Dalit community. According to him, Dalit candidates who had solely secured their electoral victory because of the votes of Dalit electors in the final election could claim to represent Dalits.⁶⁴ As mentioned above, 110 candidates from the Dalit community secured their positions only via the support of Dalit voters in the final provincial polls held from 1936 to 1937. Hence, in terms of “effective representation,” Dalits obtained far greater political autonomy and influence via the Poona Pact than they would have got under the Communal Award, which allocated seventy-one seats. Also, the assertion made by Ambedkar that the Congress would never have been able to get a significant number of seats reserved for Dalits under the Communal Award lacks adequate evidence. For example, despite implementing separate electorates, the Congress party managed to secure a substantial number of seats allocated for Muslims, Sikhs, and Indian Christians at the provincial elections held between 1936 and 1937 (Table 4).⁶⁵

In the subsequent provincial elections between 1945 and 1946, out of the total 151 seats reserved for Dalit representation, primary elections did not take place for forty-five seats. There was also a lack of competition for the forty-five seats in the final polls since just a single Dalit candidate was nominated, resulting in their automatic election to the reserved seat. Among the group of forty-five candidates, forty-three were affiliated with the Indian National Congress, while the remaining two were Independent candidates. Moreover, there was no competition for sixty-three reserved seats allocated for Dalits at the primary election stage. This lack of contestation arose due to a shortfall in the number of Dalit candidates nominated, which exceeded one but did not surpass four. In the final polls held for the sixty-three seats mentioned above, sixty candidates from the Dalit community affiliated with the Congress party were victorious. In comparison, Independent candidates won the remaining three seats.⁶⁶ Therefore, the apprehension about the possibility of caste Hindu voters electing Dalit candidates previously rejected by Dalit voters in the primary elections did not arise in 108 reserved seats because primary elections did not occur for these reserved constituencies (Table 5).

The provincial elections of 1945–1946 saw the conduction of primary elections to fill forty-three reserved seats. In the primary elections, whereby the electorate consisted only of individuals belonging to the Dalit community, the Indian National Congress obtained twenty-nine per cent of the votes. On the other hand, Ambedkar’s All-India Scheduled Caste Federation gained twenty-six per cent of the votes. At the same time, Independent Dalit candidates garnered forty-four per cent of the votes. In the contested reserved seats, the Congress party emerged as the leading contender in twenty seats,

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁶¹Reforms Office (Reforms) 1936a, File No. 20/III/1936 F.

⁶²Ambedkar 1945b, p. 95.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶⁵Santhanam 1946, p. 38.

⁶⁶Cabinet Mission: Depressed Classes 1946, File No. IOR/L/PJ/10/50.

Table 4. Number of Dalit candidates of the congress party in 1936–1937⁶⁷

Province	Number of seats reserved for Dalits	Number of elected Dalit candidates of the Congress party
Bengal	30	06
Madras	30	26
Central Provinces & Berar	20	07
United Provinces	20	16
Bihar	15	11
Bombay	15	04
Punjab	08	00
Assam	07	04
Orissa	06	04
Total	151	78

Table 5. Number of seats in which primary elections took place⁶⁸

Province	Number of seats reserved for Dalits	Number of seats in which primary elections took place
Bengal	30	15
Madras	30	10
Central Provinces & Berar	20	05
United Provinces	20	03
Bihar	15	00
Bombay	15	03
Punjab	08	07
Assam	07	00
Orissa	06	00
Total	151	43

followed by the Federation party in twelve. The remaining seats were divided among other political parties and Independent candidates, totalling eleven (Table 6).

Forty-three reserved seats were subject to primary elections due to the presence of more than four Dalit candidates vying for each of the forty-three seats. During the final election stage, panels of four Dalit candidates contended for each of the forty-three seats, competing for the support of the joint electorate, which included both Dalit and caste Hindu electors. According to Ambedkar, the candidate belonging to the Dalit community who ranked fourth on each panel would have obtained the lowest number of votes from Dalit electors. Consequently, from the perspective of caste Hindus, these individuals would be considered the most favourable since caste Hindus saw them as the least influential candidates on the panel and more likely to prioritise the interests of the caste Hindu community. Ambedkar's claim that Dalit candidates who received the highest number of Dalit votes during the

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 367–375.

⁶⁸Elections in India, 1945–46 1945 File No. IOR/L/PJ/8/483; Home Department (Political) 1946, File No. 79/46-Poll(I), Vol. III.

Table 6. Comparison of 1945–1946 primary elections and final elections⁶⁹

Province	Number of seats in which primary elections took place	Number of Dalit candidates who topped the polls at the primary elections and were also successful in the final elections
Bengal	15	12
Madras	10	07
Punjab	07	03
Central Provinces & Berar	05	01
Bombay	03	00
United Provinces	03	02
Assam	00	00
Bihar	00	00
Orissa	00	00
Total	43	25

primary elections in 1945–1946, indicating the preference among Dalit voters, were ultimately unsuccessful in the final polls as chosen in the joint electorate, is not substantiated by empirical evidence. Among the forty-three reserved seats, a noteworthy trend emerged whereby Dalit candidates who secured the most votes during the primary voting process could maintain their success and become victorious in the final polls for twenty-five of these seats. In the remaining contested seats, in the final elections, the joint electorate successfully elected a total of twelve Dalit candidates who achieved the second-place position in the primary voting, three Dalit candidates who attained the third-place rank in the primary polls, four Dalit candidates who obtained the fourth position in the primary ballot, and a single Dalit candidate who secured the sixth spot in the primary elections, to the provincial assemblies. Therefore, a significant proportion of the caste Hindu electors cast their ballots in favour of Dalit candidates who had garnered the maximum number of votes from the Dalit community during the primary polls.

The candidates vying for election to the seats reserved for Dalits in the provincial assemblies during the period of January–April 1946 were those affiliated with the Congress party, those affiliated with the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation led by Ambedkar, and candidates associated with regional parties or running as Independents. In the election of 1945–1946, Ambedkar's political party, which had previously operated as a regional party, adopted a nationwide approach by participating under the banner of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation. During the provincial assembly elections of 1945–1946, the Congress party achieved a significant electoral victory, resulting in the near-complete displacement of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation from the reserved seats designated for Dalits throughout India. Among 151 seats reserved explicitly for individuals belonging to the Dalit community, the Congress party emerged victorious in 142 seats. Conversely, candidates affiliated with the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation secured victories in a mere two seats, and various other political parties and Independent candidates won the other seven seats (Table 7).⁷⁰

Ambedkar attributed the electoral defeat of the All-India Scheduled Caste Federation in the 1945–1946 elections to the Poona Pact. He elucidated the constraints inherent in the joint electorate system, particularly with primary elections, drawing upon the outcome of the provincial elections held between 1945 and 1946. According to Ambedkar, the Poona Pact failed to effectively facilitate the

⁶⁹Cabinet Mission: Depressed Classes 1946, File No. IOR/L/PJ/10/50.

⁷⁰Elections in India, 1945–46 1945 File No. IOR/L/PJ/8/483; Home Department (Political) 1946, File No. 79/46-Poll(I), Vol. III.

Table 7. Number of Dalit candidates of the congress party in 1945–1946⁷¹

Province	Number of seats reserved for Dalits	Number of elected Dalit candidates of the Congress party
Bengal	30	25
Madras	30	30
Central Provinces & Berar	20	19
United Provinces	20	20
Bihar	15	15
Bombay	15	14
Punjab	08	06
Assam	07	07
Orissa	06	06
Total	151	142

election of the most suitable Dalit candidate, as evidenced by the discrepancy between the primary elections held in 1945–1946 and the subsequent final elections. In this regard, he observed that Dalit candidates who emerged as frontrunners in the primary voting could not secure victory in the final election. In contrast, those who had fared poorly in the primary polls ensured the highest number of votes in the final election. According to him, the electoral outcome of the 1945–1946 provincial elections demonstrated the potential for total disenfranchisement of Dalits within a joint electorate system. Ambedkar attributed this outcome to the fact that caste Hindus had voted for those Dalit candidates who had been unsuccessful in the primary voting, resulting in the total deprivation of the political rights of Dalits.⁷² However, an analysis of the provincial election outcome from 1945–1946 reveals that concerns over the possibility of caste Hindu electors choosing Dalit candidates who had been unsuccessful in the primary voting did not materialise in 108 reserved seats since primary polls did not occur for these particular seats. In forty-three constituencies where primary elections took place, Dalit candidates who secured the most votes in the primaries were also victorious in twenty-five constituencies. Notably, in these twenty-five constituencies, both Dalit and caste Hindu voters united in supporting the winning Dalit candidates during the final elections. Furthermore, it was an unavoidable outcome within the framework of a joint electorate system that Dalit candidates ultimately elected would be deemed acceptable by the whole electorate.

While having Dalit candidates in legislatures is essential, having them elected via a separate or joint electorate is insufficient for the transition from descriptive to substantive representation. Various normative, institutional, and political factors often determine the shift from descriptive to substantive presence that transcends beyond the achievement of genuine political representation via separate or joint electorates.

Ideological and programmatic dynamics of the congress

According to Bram Wauters *et al.* two significant determinants impact the degree to which a political party advocates for the interests of minority groups. These determinants include the party's ideology and the level of engagement shown by the party with minority communities.⁷³ From its inception in 1885 until 1917, the Indian National Congress refrained from addressing social reform issues to prevent any adverse effects on the emerging political solidarity among the people of India. In 1917, the

⁷¹Elections in India, 1945–46 1945 File No. IOR/L/PJ/8/483.

⁷²Ambedkar 1947, p. 45.

⁷³Wauters, Eelbode and Celis 2018, pp. 6–7.

Congress party underwent a significant shift in its stance, as shown by the passage of a resolution that advocated for recognising the imperative, justice, and moral rectitude in eliminating all societal constraints placed on Dalits.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the Congress failed to implement any tangible measures in this regard.⁷⁵ However, Gandhi emphasised eradicating untouchability, asserting that this cause had equal importance to the political movement for independence. He significantly contributed to the inclusion of the eradication of untouchability as a part of the non-cooperation resolution approved at the Nagpur Congress in December 1920.⁷⁶ Gandhi was the “critical actor,” a catalyst in raising awareness about eradicating untouchability inside the Congress. His efforts not only propelled the issue to the top of the Congress party’s agenda but also empowered the Congress to initiate measures to advance policies for Dalits, irrespective of the degree of Dalit representation within the party. Eleanor Zelliott argues that Gandhi’s ascension to prominence within the Congress in 1919 marked a significant turning point since it led to the recognition of social reform as a genuine issue of concern for the Congress party. Gandhi’s leadership inside the Congress brought about a significant shift in its attitude towards the issue of untouchability.⁷⁷

After the withdrawal of the non-cooperation satyagraha in 1922, the Congress party members received instructions from the Congress Working Committee to actively promote the enrolment of Dalit children in national schools. Additionally, the Working Committee tasked them with ensuring that Dalits had the same facilities and opportunities as other citizens and assisting in efforts to enhance their social and moral well-being.⁷⁸ As the President of the Belgaum Congress in 1924, Gandhi advocated for increased focus among Hindu members of the Congress on improving the conditions of Dalits. He emphasised the importance of identifying the specific needs of Dalits, such as access to wells, places of worship, educational opportunities, and other essential facilities. Gandhi urged the Congress to take necessary measures to address these needs and fulfil them accordingly.⁷⁹ In 1924, Gandhi extended his support to the Vaikom Satyagraha, a movement under the auspices of the Kerala Congress Committee. The primary objective of this movement was to advocate for the rights of Dalits to use the prohibited roads leading to the temple. As a result of Gandhi’s involvement, the road adjacent to the temple was successfully opened to individuals of all castes, challenging the practice of untouchability.⁸⁰ Moreover, during a meeting held in 1929, the Congress Working Committee decided to establish an Anti-Untouchability Sub-Committee. The primary objective of this sub-committee was to protect the rights of Dalits, including their right to access temples, use public wells, secure hygienic living conditions, and eliminate the many restrictions imposed on them inside educational institutions.⁸¹

Furthermore, Bram Wauters and other scholars contend that heightened political party activity correlates positively with the ability to connect with minority groups and advance their interests effectively.⁸² Until 1937, the Congress party did not have political power, limiting its capacity to enact significant legislative or administrative measures for the welfare of Dalits. Therefore, the primary focus of the Congress included the politicisation, activation, and mobilisation of the people of India, which encompassed their participation in non-violent mass political movements aimed at achieving independence from British rule and their involvement in campaigns against caste discrimination and untouchability.⁸³ Kasturiranga Santhanam, a member of the Congress party, argues that despite the political significance of the civil disobedience campaigns initiated by the Congress during

⁷⁴Zaidi and Zaidi 1967–1994, Vol. 7, pp. 202–203.

⁷⁵Pantham 2009, p. 182.

⁷⁶Indian National Congress 1920, Appendix F, p. 3.

⁷⁷Zelliott 1988, p. 184.

⁷⁸Gandhi 1956–94, Vol. 22, p. 380.

⁷⁹Indian National Congress 1924, p. 7.

⁸⁰King 2015.

⁸¹Indian National Congress 1929.

⁸²Wauters, Eelbode and Celis 2018, p. 7.

⁸³Pantham 2009, p. 195.

the periods of 1920–1922, 1930–1934, and 1942–1945, it is undeniable that the extensive interpersonal interactions among numerous national workers during their imprisonment, where they interacted as equals without regard for the caste system’s norms, had a notable impact on the erosion of caste divisions. Additionally, Santhanam reminisced about another kind of activism:

“During the three stormy years of 1920–1923, rural India ... awoke to the puzzling spectacle of youths belonging to the highest castes thundering to shocked audiences on the crime of treating fellowmen and women as Untouchables. These youths went to the hamlets of the Untouchables and defied the elders to boycott or punish them. Having had the privilege of belonging to this heroic band, I can testify to the marvellous effect produced by these years of intense propaganda ... and consequently more valuable.”⁸⁴

Although the mass civil disobedience movements led by the Congress were intermittent, Gandhi integrated constructive work into the ideology and organisational framework of the Congress in 1920, which the party members consistently pursued. One of the advantages of constructive work was its ability to engage a substantial number of Congress members. The engagement in constructive activities throughout the non-mass stages of the struggle fostered a continued commitment to action. The Congress party strategically oriented the constructive activities towards many objectives, including concerted efforts to combat the deeply entrenched practise of untouchability and facilitate the socio-economic advancement of the marginalised Dalit community. The proliferation of several ashrams around the country, mostly in rural areas, represented constructive work. These ashrams provided a platform for Congress members to get hands-on instruction in manufacturing khadi and engage in activities to uplift the Dalit community. The significance of khadi and working among the Dalit community held additional importance. Dalits, a historically oppressed community, could not envision their participation in any form of struggle due to the absence of social and economic empowerment, which caste Hindus had deprived them of for centuries. The Dalit community also heavily emphasised the transformative power of constructive work. They said engaging in such activity instilled a renewed sense of optimism, facilitated personal growth by helping them overcome fear, fostered self-reliance, and actively empowered them to strive for social and economic progress within their community.⁸⁵ The upliftment of Dalits played a significant role in promoting a cohesive movement against caste discrimination and untouchability since the active involvement of Dalits was crucial for the movement’s success. Therefore, participation in a continuous stream of constructive action characterised the movement’s non-mass periods, effectively facilitating a continued feeling of activism. The constructive workers served as a vital means for the Congress leadership to establish and maintain communication with the rural population, especially those from the Dalit community. Hence, the resolutions passed by the Congress, together with its sub-committees dedicated to addressing untouchability and its endeavours to advocate for the needs of the Dalit community, demonstrate that the eradication of untouchability was an integral component of the ideological and programmatic framework of the Congress. As a result of adopting such an ideological position, the Congress party demonstrated a greater inclination towards promoting the interests and addressing the concerns of the Dalit community.

Moreover, Gandhi’s “epic fast” in 1932 catalysed establishing an independent campaign against untouchability under his leadership. Within the framework of a newly developing political structure, the “epic fast” was endorsed by a vow made by leaders from the caste Hindu community at public gatherings in Bombay. The vow aimed to provide absolute social and political equality for Dalits, as well as to actively strive towards the eradication of all forms of disadvantages and adversities faced by them. On 30 September 1932, a significant gathering of leaders belonging to the caste Hindu community took place in the Cowasji Jehangir Hall in Bombay, with Madan Mohan Malaviya serving as the President of the meeting. The meeting passed a resolution to form the

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁸⁵Chandra 2008, pp. 58–59.

Harijan Sevak Sangh, with its main office in Delhi and other branches in several provinces. The primary objective of this organisation was to engage in propaganda activities aimed at eradicating the practice of untouchability. To achieve the intended goal, it decided to promptly implement the following measures: (a) the declaration of free and equal access for Dalits to public water sources, dharmashalas, roads, educational institutions, crematoriums, burning ghats, and other public amenities, and (b) the removal of barriers to entry for members of the Dalit community in public temples.⁸⁶ As a result, the initiatives undertaken by the Harijan Sevak Sangh encompassed four key dimensions: (a) campaigns aimed at advocating for the civic rights of Dalits; (b) initiatives focused on promoting equal opportunities for Dalits; (c) campaigns facilitating social interaction, wherein individuals from the upper caste would extend invitations to Dalits as guests or domestic help; and (d) collaborative efforts between individuals from the upper caste and Dalits to eradicate the practice of untouchability.⁸⁷ Moreover, Rule 24 of the Constitution of the Harijan Sevak Sangh mandated that each Board or Committee should strive to include as many Dalit members as feasible,⁸⁸ which aimed to give Dalits a direct opportunity to participate in its governance and decision-making processes. Indeed, establishing the Harijan Sevak Sangh facilitated the emergence of a powerful and independent movement against untouchability. This anti-untouchability campaign was crucial in garnering widespread public support for the Congress ministries' initiatives to combat untouchability when it came to power, contributing significantly to enhancing the ministries' capacity to effectively address the concerns and challenges faced by the Dalit community.

Congress ministries and the substantive representation of Dalits

The primary assertion made by Dalits was that they wanted the eradication of untouchability, particularly addressing the longstanding prohibition that prevented their participation in religious practices inside Hindu temples.⁸⁹ Furthermore, according to Ambedkar, it was imperative that Dalits have complete civic rights, including the right to get water from village wells, enrol in village schools, gain entrance to village chawdis, and use public transportation, among other rights. However, he also made a prognostication about the potential challenges that would impede the progress of a civic rights movement to empower the Dalit community. Among these hurdles, the most significant one he anticipated was the occurrence of violent clashes between Dalits and those belonging to the higher castes, leading to physical harm and subsequent legal repercussions for either party involved. Ambedkar also made a prescient observation on the biased attitudes of the police and magistrates, which tended to favour those belonging to the caste Hindu community. Therefore, to ensure the attainment of civic rights for Dalits, Ambedkar underscored the need for the authorities responsible for maintaining law and order to align themselves with the interests of the Dalit community since this alignment was crucial for achieving a favourable outcome for Dalits.⁹⁰

The Government of India Act 1935 facilitated the expansion of the franchise to around thirty-five million individuals, presenting the Congress party with a chance to engage with Dalits and caste Hindus on a large scale. The Congress effectively capitalised on this opportunity by engaging with these communities throughout their election campaigns. Gandhi guided the constructive workers, urging them to use the opportunity presented by the elections to educate the electorate about the issue of untouchability and to hold the Congress candidates accountable for their commitment to eradicating untouchability.⁹¹ The electoral manifesto of the Congress in 1937 emphasised the eradication of untouchability and promoting social and economic advancement for the Dalit community. The manifesto also asserted that individuals belonging to the Dalit community should possess equal status

⁸⁶Harijan Sevak Sangh 1935, p. 2.

⁸⁷Biswas 2023.

⁸⁸Harijan Sevak Sangh 1935, pp. 8, 16.

⁸⁹Coupland 1944, p. 144.

⁹⁰Ambedkar 1945b, p. 135.

⁹¹Gandhi 1956–94, Vol. 64, p. 216.

as citizens alongside others, thereby enjoying equitable entitlements in all aspects of civil affairs.⁹² The 1945 Congress election manifesto advocated for a comprehensive set of fundamental rights for the prospective republic of India. These rights encompassed eliminating discrimination based on caste concerning public employment, positions of authority, and recognition and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens in their respective professions and trades. Moreover, the manifesto emphasised the equal entitlement of all citizens to access public infrastructure such as roads, wells, educational institutions, and other public places. The election manifesto additionally pledged to ensure adequate measures for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of marginalised or disadvantaged groups within the Indian population, specifically focusing on enhancing educational opportunities and facilitating the social and economic advancement of Dalits.⁹³

As a result, the Congress ministries, which assumed power between 1937 and 1939 and 1946 and 1947 in the provinces of Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Central Provinces, Madras, North-West Frontier Province, Orissa, and United Provinces, openly expressed their opposition to the enforcement of discriminatory practices against Dalits. In this context, the Executive Committee of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, during its conference held on 30–31 October 1937, also requested the provincial governments, particularly those under the governance of the Congress, to issue a formal statement outlining their intended strategies for eradicating untouchability.⁹⁴ The Congress governments in the provinces responded positively to the request made by the Harijan Sevak Sangh. For example, the Congress government in the United Provinces issued a policy statement in May 1938 and subsequently sent to every District Magistrate, stating that

“Public wells are as much free and open to these castes as to the higher caste Hindus and other sections of the community. The government cannot possibly recognise any distinction on any ground whatsoever in the case of users of public wells and will do their utmost to enforce such right. All people are entitled to a free and unfettered use of all public property, such as public highways, public wells, public parks, and public buildings. While the government will not fail to do its duty in regard to this matter, it is obvious that public and social opinion must exercise the greatest influence in the solution of any difficulties which may arise in any part of the province. The government appeals most strongly to all sections of the public to ensure full support to the members of the Scheduled Castes in the enjoyment of their fundamental rights in this respect.”⁹⁵

Any kind of legal pressure is often ineffective in removing social disadvantages imposed by tradition. Even the British government, having complete power, could not progress in eradicating social inequalities via law. For example, in 1923, resolutions and ordinances were enacted in the Bombay and Madras governments, affirming the entitlement of Dalits to equitable access to government amenities, educational institutions, and water sources. Nevertheless, after seven years, a District Board decided to display notifications indicating that amenities were accessible to Dalits in those villages where public sentiment was deemed favourable towards implementing such measures.⁹⁶ When the resolution of a particular issue relies only on the collective moral awareness of society, the effectiveness of legal and constitutional measures becomes constrained. The Harijan Sevak Sangh feared that the efficacy of the Congress ministries’ mandates in addressing social inequalities would be ineffective for want of public support. Consequently, the Harijan Sevak Sangh resolved to undertake an extensive campaign to foster awareness and understanding among caste Hindus and Dalit communities to create public opinion to eradicate these entrenched societal disabilities.⁹⁷ Gandhi also advocated that, given the altered

⁹²Nehru 1975, Vol. 7 (First Series), p. 462.

⁹³Santhanam 1946, pp. 108–109.

⁹⁴Verma 1971, p. 145.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

⁹⁶Galanter 1969, p. 135.

⁹⁷Verma 1971, p. 146.

conditions, the workers of the Harijan Sevak Sangh needed to establish a solid foundation of public support for the anti-untouchability initiatives implemented by the Congress governments.⁹⁸

In light of Gandhi's consistent emphasis on the importance of understanding the perspectives and needs of the Dalit community in any initiatives aimed at their welfare,⁹⁹ the Congress ministries made appointments of Dalit individuals as Ministers in the Cabinets of Assam, Bihar, and Madras, and as Parliamentary Secretaries in Bihar, Madras, and the United Provinces.¹⁰⁰ The Congress governments sent a powerful message to caste Hindus by appointing Dalits to Cabinet Minister and Parliamentary Secretary positions, as this act symbolised the recognition of Dalits as equal members of society, capable of attaining the highest positions within the nation. Consequently, this gesture played a significant role in fostering newfound respect among caste Hindus towards individuals whom they had previously marginalised and held in contempt. The appointments also had a profound psychological impact on those belonging to the Dalit community.¹⁰¹ Such a symbolic value of representation has significance for disadvantaged minorities, as it mitigates the sense of alienation experienced by socially marginalised groups.¹⁰² Symbolic representation serves as a means to minimise the alienation experienced by marginalised social groups within society, as it has the potential to influence the perspectives of both minority and non-minority individuals, fostering a sense of legitimacy and inclusion for the former within the broader social fabric. The symbolic dimension of political representation emerges when both minority and non-minority individuals regard the participation of minorities in governmental affairs as a paradigm for their inclusion in all the other domains of society.¹⁰³

Furthermore, according to Miriam Hänni, minority representatives who hold positions within the executive branch of the government possess a distinct advantage in facilitating the integration of policies beneficial for minority groups into the legislative framework. The likelihood of a government being sensitive to the concerns of a minority group is higher when it includes individuals from that particular group among its ranks. Thus, to Hänni, the impact of descriptive representation is more pronounced when a minority group is concurrently present inside the government.¹⁰⁴ The United Provinces provides an instance whereby Karan Singh Kane, belonging to the Dalit community, assumed the role of Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education. Notably, Kane concurrently held the position of chairman of the Depressed Classes Education Advisory Committee.¹⁰⁵ Due to the efforts of Kane, the Congress government in the United Provinces allocated more funds towards the educational advancement of Dalits, which surpassed previous initiatives in this regard. For example, the government gave a sum of 196,000 rupees for a specific expenditure targeting the Dalit community, supplemented by an additional 125,000 rupees. The government also allocated scholarships to a total of 8,000 students belonging to the Dalit community, spanning from primary education to the university level. Additionally, it distributed educational resources like textbooks and writing tools to approximately 40,000 individuals from the Dalit community.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, there was an increase in the allocation of seats for individuals from the Dalit community at Teachers' Training Institutions, with the number increasing from fifteen to ninety-six.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, while serving in legislatures, the Dalit representatives associated with the Congress party introduced numerous resolutions, posed many inquiries, and presented motions on comparable topics, concerns, and challenges. Their objective was to assert the fundamental civil rights of Dalits and improve the educational, social, economic, and political conditions of the Dalit community residing in various parts of the country.

⁹⁸ *Harijan*, 1 January 1938.

⁹⁹ Gandhi 1956-94, Vol. 51, pp. 347-348.

¹⁰⁰ Verma 1971, p. 145.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

¹⁰² Pantoja and Segura 2003.

¹⁰³ Theobald and Haider-Markel 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Hänni 2017, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰⁵ Verma 1971, pp. 144, 159.

¹⁰⁶ Santhanam 1946, p. 46.

¹⁰⁷ Verma 1971, p. 157.

In addition to the Dalit Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries, it is noteworthy to mention the significant contributions made by Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, Balasaheb Gangadhar Kher, and Narayan Bhaskar Khare, who served as Prime Ministers in the governments of Madras, Bombay, and Central Provinces, respectively. Despite belonging to the caste Hindu community, these individuals played a pivotal role as “critical actors” in promoting and addressing the policy concerns of the Dalit community. In 1938, the Congress government in Madras, working with its twenty-six Dalit legislators, successfully enacted the Madras Removal of Civil Disabilities Act. M.C. Rajah, a Dalit representative serving in the Madras legislature, had introduced the legislative measure. The Madras Removal of Civil Disabilities Act was a significant legislative measure to address social inequalities by penalising discriminatory practices against Dalits. This Act prohibited discrimination in publicly funded facilities such as roads, wells, and public transportation. It also extended its protection to encompass “any other secular institution” accessible to the general public, including restaurants, hotels, and shops. The Act prohibited the enforcement by the courts of any customary entitlement or disadvantage arising from affiliation with a Dalit community. Violation of the Act was designated as a cognisable crime, carrying a minor monetary penalty for the first infraction, and future violations would incur more substantial penalties and the possibility of imprisonment for up to six months. The Act also stipulated that people of the Hindu religion, irrespective of their affiliation with a Dalit community, must not have any restriction in their eligibility for appointment to any governmental position.¹⁰⁸ Implementing these extensive legislative initiatives did not occur via the overpowering influence of the Congress party apparatus. Rajagopalachari and his associates immediately initiated a vast propaganda campaign upon forming the government, as they encountered strong resistance from orthodox Hindus, including those from the Brahmin caste and those from other caste groups. However, Rajagopalachari discovered that many of his most fervent supporters were from the Brahmin community.¹⁰⁹

During the period after World War II and before the implementation of the Constitution of India, the Congress party, in conjunction with its Dalit legislators, introduced legislative measures to eliminate the civil disadvantages faced by the Dalit community in all the provinces where it established governments. The legislative acts exhibited a degree of variance in their specific details but adhered to the fundamental principles outlined in the Madras Removal of Civil Disabilities Act of 1937. The legislative acts prohibited implementing discriminatory practices against Dalits regarding using public amenities such as wells, roads and public accommodations, including stores, restaurants, and hotels. The statutes included provisions that criminalised infractions, with most instances being deemed cognisable crimes. The judicial enforcement of traditions perpetuating Dalit dehumanisation was also prohibited.¹¹⁰ In this context, the Harijan Sevak Sangh played a significant role in facilitating the realisation of the Congress ministries’ proclamations in the provinces that Dalits had equal access to all public amenities, asserting their civic rights.¹¹¹

According to sociological research, Dalits residing in rural areas, even after adopting Buddhism, have not entirely relinquished their previous Hindu deities. Dalit individuals who have embraced Buddhism in rural areas exhibit a notable increase in self-confidence, as seen by their enthusiastic participation in Hindu festivals, particularly those formerly forbidden to them. Dalit converts demonstrate their self-confidence through their involvement in public celebrations, preparation of sacred dishes that were once banned, and other similar acts. Caste Hindus express discontent towards Dalits due to their non-compliance with established Hindu norms and their participation in Hindu religious practices that are traditionally prohibited. Thus, only when Dalits have the right to engage in the same religious rituals and practises as caste Hindus – which caste Hindus prevented them from doing – do they believe they are on an equal footing with caste Hindus. Similarly, Gandhi

¹⁰⁸Coupland 1944, p. 144.

¹⁰⁹Santhanam 1946, p. 44.

¹¹⁰Mitra 1947, pp. 97–102.

¹¹¹Verma 1971, p. 161.

had emphasised attaining “religious equality” for Dalits via their access to temples,¹¹² leading to the enactment of several temple entry legislation by the Congress ministries in the provinces.

In 1938, a significant development took place in British India when the Congress ministries made a notable intervention to facilitate the access of Dalits to Hindu temples. The Congress governments achieved temple entry for Dalits by enacting temple entry acts in Bombay and Madras, which had strong support from the elected Dalit members of the Congress and non-Congress political parties. The initiation of the Madras statute began with the enactment of a law stipulating that temples located throughout the Malabar District would be accessible to Dalits upon obtaining a majority vote among caste Hindus residing in the vicinity. Additionally, due to the abovementioned decision to open certain temples within the Malabar region, the Congress government introduced an ordinance to safeguard authorities and trustees from any legal action by orthodox Hindus. Subsequently, the government enacted a complete statute at the provincial level, granting trustees the authority to permit Dalit individuals to enter temples, provided that, in their judgement, the worshippers of these temples were usually not opposed to such inclusion. When trustees made a Hindu shrine accessible to Dalits, implementing this law protected the trustees and Dalits, safeguarding them from legal consequences. In Bombay, where conservative Hindu sentiment had a significant influence similar to that in Madras, the government led by the Congress party enacted legislation in 1938 with the support of elected candidates from the Dalit community belonging to the Congress and Ambedkar’s parties. The Act had similarities with the law in Madras. It included a punitive clause, criminalising the act of prohibiting Dalits from participating in worship inside a temple that had been made accessible to them. During the period when the Congress governments resigned in October 1939, there were ongoing legislative efforts to introduce similar temple entry measures in the Central Provinces and Berar, as well as in the United Provinces.¹¹³

Nonetheless, the temple entry regulations before the Second World War were only permissive. The temple entry statute provided legal protection to both trustees and Dalits, shielding them from legal repercussions if the former disregarded the conventional practises of exclusion. However, the trustees were not legally obligated to provide Dalits access to temples, and Dalits did not possess a lawfully enforceable entitlement to enter these places of worship. Upon the Congress party’s return to positions of authority in 1946, the Congress-led government in Madras played a proactive role in promulgating and implementing an all-encompassing temple entry act. This act, facilitated by the thirty Dalit representatives affiliated with the Congress party, criminalised any hindrance or obstruction preventing Hindus, irrespective of their caste, from accessing and engaging in worship at temples on an equal footing with the caste Hindu community. With the complete backing of the Congress’s Dalit members who were elected to serve in the provincial legislatures, similar legislations, with some minor differences in the specifics, were approved in the provinces where the Congress had established governments. These legislative measures abolished the legal enforcement, both in civil and criminal contexts, of traditional practices that denied individuals from the Dalit community the right to enter temples. Instead, they established a legally binding right for Dalits to access and worship at temples.¹¹⁴

While the sentiments of Dalits were significantly preoccupied with gaining access to temples, their most pressing pragmatic need revolved around acquiring education¹¹⁵ and securing employment. According to empirical research, a positive correlation exists between the expansion of economic prospects for individuals belonging to the Dalit community and a subsequent reduction in the prevalence of untouchability practices within the respective localities. Empirical research has also identified education as a significant means of facilitating social mobility. Consequently, it is crucial to prioritise the provision of universal primary education and even extend it to secondary education for those belonging to the Dalit community.¹¹⁶ The lack of educational and employment opportunities for the majority

¹¹²Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee 2008, pp. 636–637.

¹¹³Venkataraman 1946, p. 58.

¹¹⁴Galanter 1969, pp. 136–137.

¹¹⁵Coupland 1944, p. 145.

¹¹⁶Chandra, Mukherjee and Mukherjee 2008, pp. 638–639.

of Dalits undermines the notion of Dalit empowerment through the limited representation of a few Dalits in legislative bodies and higher administrative positions because such representation holds no more significance than a symbolic gesture, which the Congress ministries and the Harijan Sevak Sangh fully acknowledged. As a result, the Executive Committee of the Harijan Sevak Sangh requested the Congress ministries to establish Special Departments and designate Special Officers to promote the welfare of the Dalit community. These departments and officers were to address the disabilities Dalits faced in accessing common educational institutions, public wells, and other water sources and provide general assistance to Dalits in overcoming societal disadvantages.¹¹⁷ The Executive Committee of the Harijan Sevak Sangh further brought to the notice of the Congress ministries the significance of “Clause 9” of the Poona Pact. This clause stipulated that in each province, the government should allocate a sufficient amount of the education grant to offer educational opportunities to individuals belonging to the Dalit community. Consequently, upon the ascension of the Congress to power, the Congress governments in Madras, Bombay, and the United Provinces established Special Departments to promote the welfare of the Dalit community.¹¹⁸ The Congress governments in Madras and Bombay further augmented the pre-existing Special Departments dedicated to the welfare of Dalits, fostering greater collaboration with governmental entities engaged in similar endeavours. The Congress governments established Provincial Advisory Boards in Bombay and Madras, with the Congress government in Madras further establishing Advisory Committees at the district level to address the welfare of Dalits.¹¹⁹ The District Advisory Committees guided the Collectors on topics about the well-being of Dalits. At the same time, the Provincial Advisory Committee facilitated the coordination of activities carried out by the District Committees.¹²⁰ In 1946, the Congress government in Orissa took action based on the recommendations of a committee tasked with investigating the conditions of Dalits in Orissa and proposing measures for their advancement. As a result, the government appointed a Special Officer for Dalits. It also incorporated a new section into the Planning and Reconstruction Department to address all issues of this marginalised community. Likewise, in the province of Bihar, the government led by the Congress party established a dedicated administrative unit called the Welfare Department to address and improve the living conditions of Dalits.¹²¹ Furthermore, in addition to the portion of benefits that Dalits received from the overall budget for education, the Congress government in Madras authorised supplementary funding designated explicitly for Dalits through a Special Department responsible for this purpose.¹²²

Moreover, provincial governments under the control of the Congress party declined to provide acknowledgement and assistance to educational institutions that did not enrol Dalit children. In Bombay, a significant transformation occurred wherein common schools assimilated most of the separate educational institutions catering to the Dalit community. As a result, there was a consistent rise in the enrolment of Dalit students in these common educational establishments. In the provinces governed by the Congress party, significant governmental measures¹²³ and the concerted endeavours and advocacy of the Harijan Sevak Sangh aimed at facilitating the enrolment of Dalit children into educational institutions expedited the admission of Dalit children in common schools.¹²⁴ In Bihar, Orissa, and Madras, the Congress ministries mandated educational institutions to admit Dalit students and provide them with equitable resources and opportunities as a prerequisite for obtaining official recognition. The Congress ministries had further provided specific privileges to children from the Dalit community, including scholarships, fee waivers, and free textbooks, among other benefits. The Congress ministry in Bombay issued a directive to the local authorities, stipulating that

¹¹⁷Verma 1971, p. 145.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹²⁰Santhanam 1946, p. 45.

¹²¹Mitra 1947, pp. 100–102.

¹²²Rajagopalachari 1946, p. 26.

¹²³Coupland 1944, p. 145.

¹²⁴Verma 1971, p. 160.

establishing or recognising separate educational institutions for Dalits would only be permissible in the future under extraordinary circumstances.¹²⁵

In addition to facilitating the expansion of educational facilities for Dalits in India, the Congress ministry actively promoted the inclusion of Dalits in the recruiting process for government services. In Madras, the Congress ministry implemented a quota system wherein the government reserved one appointment out of every twelve for individuals belonging to the Dalit community. The age limit and minimum educational qualifications for Dalits were also relaxed. As a result, in the province, there was a notable presence of individuals from the Dalit community in government services, including nine superior gazetted officials, twenty-nine non-gazetted officers, and a substantial number of Dalit individuals in the subordinate services. The Congress government in the United Provinces lifted the ban on recruiting Dalits into the police force, removing a previous barrier to their employment. The government appointed two individuals from the Dalit community to the esteemed positions of Deputy Collector and Deputy Superintendent of Police. Dalits had also achieved significant appointments in several government ministries, including the police, excise, rural development, and cooperative sectors. In Bombay, the Congress government implemented a policy wherein ten per cent of the positions were set aside expressly for individuals belonging to the Dalit community. The government also instructed school boards to actively prioritise recruiting Dalit teachers, aiming to maximise their representation within the teaching profession. As a result, in 1937–1938, twenty-four individuals from the Dalit community who had completed their matriculation and seventy-nine Dalits with lower credentials successfully obtained employment within the government sector. A group of ten individuals from the Dalit community underwent training to become stipendiaries in-office procedures, and afterwards, the government employed nine of them.¹²⁶

Conclusion

The Poona Pact effectively safeguarded the rights of the Dalit community by implementing measures such as the provision of reserved seats, the establishment of primary elections, and the adoption of cumulative voting. Implementing reserved seats ensured a more direct and accurate representation of Dalits since it guaranteed that the number of Dalit representatives in legislative assemblies would be equal to or greater than the number of seats allocated for reservations. The implementation of primary elections effectively ensured that Dalit candidates, elected to occupy the seats reserved for Dalits in the final run-off polls for the provincial assemblies conducted in 1936–1937 and 1945–1946, had substantial support and trust from a significant portion of their community. However, the provincial elections did not entirely achieve the intended objective of primary voting since the majority of constituencies had a shortfall in the number of Dalit candidates competing for a reserved seat, with fewer than four individuals vying for election. The limited number of candidates contesting in the primary elections was due to the educational and economic challenges faced by the Dalit community and the lack of a well-established leadership class among their ranks. The 1936–1937 and 1945–1946 provincial elections did not see the conduct of primary elections in 120 and 108 constituencies, respectively. Nevertheless, in most instances, the absence of a sufficient number of Dalit candidates for primary voting was advantageous for the Dalit community. In these constituencies, it was unlikely for caste Hindu electors to secure the victory of Dalit candidates in the final polls by voting for those Dalits who had received the least votes from the Dalit electorate during the primary elections. Furthermore, the implementation of the cumulative method of voting resulted in an increased political influence for Dalit voters in constituencies with many seats. Dalit voters used this advantage to allocate all or a substantial portion of their votes to candidates from the Dalit community whom they favoured. Moreover, during the elections of 1936–1937, there was a notable lack of enthusiasm among caste Hindus towards electing Dalit candidates, leading to a *de facto* implementation of separate electorates

¹²⁵Coupland 1944, p. 145.

¹²⁶Verma 1971, pp. 157–158.

inside joint electorates. However, in the subsequent elections of 1945–1946, there was a significant shift in the voting behaviour of caste Hindus, as they predominantly supported Dalit candidates who had garnered the highest votes from the Dalit community in the primary elections. Therefore, the electoral outcomes of the provincial elections demonstrated that the implementation of reservation of seats, primary polls, and cumulative voting mechanisms effectively fulfilled the objective of the Poona Pact in ensuring genuine descriptive representation for Dalits in India.

Furthermore, implementing the Poona Pact system of elections not only ensured sufficient and authentic representation for the Dalit community in provincial legislative assemblies, but it also strengthened the electoral power of Dalits, independently of their representation. While empirical research cannot conclusively establish that electoral procedures directly lead to substantive representation,¹²⁷ it is evident that the arrangement of reserved seats in joined electorates had provided Dalits with a more significant advantage than separate electorates. According to Ambedkar's assertion,

“This must be said with certainty that a minority gets a larger advantage under joint electorates than it does under a system of separate electorates. With separate electorates the minority gets its own quota of representation and no more. The rest of the house owes no allegiance to it and is therefore not influenced by the desire to meet the wishes of the minority. The minority is thus thrown on its own resources and as no system of representation can convert a minority into a majority, it is bound to be overwhelmed. On the other hand, under a system of joint electorates and reserved seats the minority not only gets its quota of representation but something more. For, every member of the majority who has partly succeeded on the strength of the votes of the minority if not a member of the minority, will certainly be a member for the minority.”¹²⁸

In other words, candidates belonging to the caste Hindu community within the Congress party, who could garner support from Dalit voters while not being members of the Dalit community, would be seen as representatives for the Dalit community. As a result, caste Hindus would exhibit a sense of loyalty towards Dalits, therefore being susceptible to the influence exerted by the aspirations of Dalits in fulfilling their demands.

The affiliation of Dalit legislators with the Congress party also had a beneficial impact on their substantive representation since there was a congruence between the interests, policy preferences, and policy orientations of the Dalit community and the Congress party. The primary interests of the Dalit community were the eradication of untouchability, the attainment of non-discriminatory treatment, the realisation of complete civic rights, and the establishment of equal opportunities within the socio-economic sphere. The Congress expressed its opposition to caste-based discrimination and, beginning in 1920, included eradicating untouchability as a fundamental component of its agenda and political endeavours. Furthermore, campaigns for securing civic rights and equal opportunities for Dalits were an integral aspect of the Congress's decisions, policies, electoral manifestos, and campaigns, as well as its sub-committees dedicated to combating untouchability until 1947. Gandhi was pivotal as the “critical actor” in motivating the Congress party to undertake initiatives to advance policies for Dalits, irrespective of the representation of Dalit individuals inside the Congress. The active involvement of Dalits and caste Hindus in public rallies, large-scale public gatherings, and satyagraha movements resulted in a notable reduction in caste-based consciousness. It significantly bolstered the anti-untouchability campaign aimed at abolishing untouchability. The Congress also maintained a spirit of activity throughout the non-mass movement stages of the struggle by implementing constructive programmes focused on various endeavours, including the fight against untouchability and the promotion of socio-economic advancement for the Dalit community. Moreover, Gandhi's “epic fast” in 1932 strengthened his dedication to abolishing untouchability, establishing an independent anti-untouchability movement under the aegis of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. The movement

¹²⁷Zuber 2015, 394.

¹²⁸Ambedkar 1982, pp. 351–352.

significantly enhanced the Congress ministries' institutional capacity to handle issues about the Dalit community effectively.

During the periods of 1937–1939 and 1946–1947, when the Congress ministries assumed the task of provincial administration in British India, they encountered many substantial challenges that required their attention and resolution. Nevertheless, the Congress ministries emphasised addressing the challenges stemming from the social disadvantages and economic hardships faced by the Dalit community. The Congress party's commitment to combating untouchability and promoting the welfare of Dalits facilitated their adequate representation in substantive terms. Furthermore, the allocation of influential roles to Congress Dalit legislators as Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries within the Congress ministries, along with the commitment of the Congress governments to endorse pertinent Dalit policies, led to the formulation and implementation of policy outcomes that catered to the welfare of the Dalit community. Consequently, the Congress ministries enacted and implemented legislation to promote the welfare and empowerment of Dalits, including the establishment of “new minority rights.”¹²⁹ The implementation of the “new minority rights” involved the enactment of legislation facilitated by elected Dalit legislators. These laws granted Dalits the right to enter temples and enjoy unrestricted access to public facilities such as offices, water sources, transportation, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and establishments funded by the public. Additionally, the laws granted Dalits equal access to restaurants and hotels. Furthermore, the Congress ministries implemented a directive that explicitly prohibited any court or public body from acknowledging or upholding any customary practice or tradition that placed civil disadvantages on those belonging to the Dalit community. There was an increase in the allocation of fellowships and freeships designated explicitly for Dalit students. The Congress governments also attempted to increase the employment opportunities of Dalit individuals within the police force and other governmental institutions.

Moreover, the Congress ministries established various public agencies for Dalits, including Special Departments, Provincial Advisory Boards, District Advisory Committees, Welfare Departments, and Planning and Reconstruction Departments. The ministries tasked these public agencies with representing Dalits within the government, working towards enhancing their socio-economic well-being, and coordinating policies for the Dalit community authoritatively and effectively. Hence, these public agencies possessed the authority to guide policy formulation across many departments in the government. The support of the autonomous anti-untouchability movement, operating through the Harijan Sevak Sangh, played a crucial role in enabling Dalit policy agencies to leverage the enhanced institutional capabilities of the Congress ministries. This support provided political pressure and input to capitalise on these improved capacities effectively. The Harijan Sevak Sangh also generated widespread public support for eradicating untouchability through anti-untouchability campaigns and constructive and mass contact programmes. Consequently, officials within the Dalit policy agencies tasked with representing the concerns of the Dalit community exhibited a positive response to the public pressure exerted by the anti-untouchability campaigns. Therefore, a powerful and independent movement against untouchability led by the Harijan Sevak Sangh enhanced the efficacy of Dalit public agencies in their role as representatives, thereby amplifying the voice of Dalits inside the government.¹³⁰

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¹²⁹Kroeber 2018, pp. 245–248.

¹³⁰Weldon 2002.

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