GANDHI, AMBEDKAR AND THE BRITISH POLICY AT THE SECOND ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE, 1931

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been criticised by historians for his stubborn, obstinate, and uncompromising behaviour at the second session of the Round Table Conference held at London, England, in 1931, that resulted in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar signing the Minorities Pact. It is also stated that if only Gandhi had agreed to seats being reserved in the Indian legislatures for the 'Untouchables',[1] they would have reconciled to joint electorates. Scholars have generally overlooked that Gandhi was never ever opposed to the 'Untouchables' being represented in the legislatures, even if they were over-represented. In fact, he was eager to ensure them proper representation and even stated his willingness to guarantee, by legislation, certain seats in legislatures to be held by the 'Untouchables'. However, the British Government, set to counterpoise one community against another, pre-empted such moves. Also, the representatives of the 'Untouchables' at the Conference did not put up any precise proposal for constitutional reserved seats for the 'Untouchables' for Gandhi's approval or rejection. They continued to hold tightly onto their demand for separate electorates that was backed explicitly and implicitly by the British Government. Following the advice of the British Premier, Ramsay MacDonald, the 'Untouchables', the Europeans, the Anglo-Indians, the Indian Christians, the Sikhs, and the Muslims formed a united anti-Congress front at the Conference. They bypassed Gandhi and produced the Minorities Pact to prevent the Conference from

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endorsing Gandhi's proposals. The Minorities Pact resulted in consolidating the communal demands and, therefore, sanctified the British ploy to divide India.

Keywords: Gandhi, Ambedkar, 'Untouchables', Minorities Pact, joint electorates, separate electorates

Introduction

The British Government had summoned the representatives of different Indian communities to London in 1931 for a Round Table Conference with the members of the British Parliament and representatives from His Majesty's Government. The overt gesture was meant to assuage the feelings of strong opposition and persistent hostility in India towards the Simon Commission (1928). Also, the demand for "Complete Independence" or "Dominion Status" raised by the Indian National Congress had produced the impression of unreality to the recommendations of the Commission and all the commentaries thereupon. Non-inclusion of Indians in the Simon Commission had provoked protests from all political groups and had resulted in a successful nationwide boycott of the Commission that had witnessed the participation of both the Congress and the All-India Muslim League. To avert any eventuality of the Hindus and Muslims coming together in the national movement, the Government threw in the bait of the Round Table Conference indicating that the Government of India was ready for a discussion with the Indians on the political future of India post-Simon Commission. When the First Round Table Conference was announced, the leaders of the Congress insisted on a statement from the Viceroy of India that discussion in the Round Table Conference would proceed from the viewpoint of granting full Dominion Status to India. However, the Viceroy gave no such assurances and made no definite promises. The First Round Table Conference was a failure even though representatives of various Indian groups and communities had participated in it.

The First Round Table Conference had proved abortive, because it failed to evolve an agreed solution on the future of constitutional settlement for British India. Disagreements impinged on the communal question. The Hindu representatives were prepared to concede all the Muslim demands in return for joint electorates. But this was what the Muslim delegates could not concede. Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1986, 3: 498-568) was said to have told a sub-committee at the First Round Table Conference that a Hindu-Muslim settlement

"was a condition precedent for framing any future constitution." The Punjab Sikh leaders were vehemently opposed to anything that would give the Muslims a majority in the province. Jinnah was also claiming, joined by the Aga Khan and Sir Mohammad Safi in a deputation to the British Premier, Ramsay MacDonald, that "there may be a civil war if their demands were not conceded" (Nanda 2010: 145). Separate electorates were also being demanded by the 'Untouchable' representatives, Ambedkar and Rettamalai Srinivasan. However, they had riders attached to their demand, that is, separate electorates for the first ten years of the grant of the constitution and, thereafter, reserved seats in joint electorates to be accompanied by universal adult suffrage for the 'Depressed Classes'. The first session of the Round Table Conference yielded no consensus on the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh tangle. Neither was the issue of the 'Untouchables' resolved. Moreover, the Indian National Congress had chosen to boycott the First Round Table Conference.

The Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Karachi Congress

The entire discussion at the first session of the Round Table Conference was organised within the ambit of "communal digits," thus making any solution of the basic political problem of political advance impossible (Chandra 2008: 302). No agreed solution to the issue of communal representation was reached at the Conference among the Indians, and the British Government was left empty-handed. The colonial agenda of cementing the support of the minority communities through communal representation to form a contingent against the Indian National Movement thus made no headway. The Government, as a result, had to find recourse to make the Indian National Congress a participant at the next round of discussions if its survival strategy in India was to rely on constitutional advancement. The Government, therefore, began to devise ways and means so as to prevent the Congress from maintaining the hard-line approach which it had adopted against the Conference. It was the time when the Congress was put centre stage in the colonial scheme of things and the Government decided to extend an olive branch to the Congress. Accordingly, the Governor-General, Lord Irwin (1926-31) issued a statement on 25 January 1931, withdrawing a notification which had declared the Congress an unlawful body. Orders were simultaneously issued to release Gandhi and other members of the Congress from jails so as to enable them to consider the Prime Minister's offer seriously. The Government's offer implied

that the colonial state had come to terms to consider the Congress as the "proper spokesman for the whole of India" (Fontera 1990: 471).

The Indian leaders themselves, who had participated in the First Round Table Conference, wanted to make the Indian National Congress part of the future discussions. The liberal leaders with Tej Bahadur Sapru, Chirravoori Yajneswara Chintamani, and Srinivas Shastri appealed to Gandhi to talk to the Viceroy in an endeavour to bring about a rapprochement with the Government. To them, Gandhi seemed to be the most viable unifier who had the capacity to cement cleavages among the different communities and leaders. For them, Gandhi also became the most obvious choice as he was leading the Civil Disobedience Movement through which the Indians had posed one of the most valiant challenges to the British rule.

Gandhi consented to become part of the constitutional dialogue. But before the Round Table Conference began, he negotiated peace terms with Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, which culminated in the signing, on 5 March 1931, of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. It came to be known as a "provisional settlement" between the Government and Gandhi representing the Indians through the Indian National Congress. The Pact had many terms, the most important being the suspension of the Salt Satyagraha, the release of political prisoners in India, the distancing of the Congress from political violence, and most importantly, Gandhi's acceptance to be present at the Second Round Table Conference. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact was a highly publicised negotiation. Immediately after signing the Pact, Gandhi attended the Congress's annual session in Karachi in March 1931, which ratified his agreement with the Viceroy of India and chose him to be the Congress's sole authorised representative at the Conference.

Gandhi was entrusted with this task by the Karachi Congress on the condition that "he would work for a constitution wherein the minorities – Muslims, Sikhs and Christians – were assured that they would be consulted on every issue affecting their material and cultural interests. At the same time, the provision of separate communal electorates, which had created so much tension and strife in the political system, would stand cancelled" (Kumar 1987: 92). Gandhi's (1956-94, 47: 133) plank was clear. He was going to make three demands: (1) India was only to have a co-equal position inside the British Empire, (2) after the first two requirements were met, protections throughout the transitional period, (3) complete independence for India.

Meeting Between Gandhi and Ambedkar

Before going to London to take part in the Round Table Conference, Gandhi was working in the background of a few developments. The British Government had recognised the claims of the Muslims as a minority by granting them separate electorates in 1909. They had also toyed with the idea to accept the demands of the Sikhs, the Anglo-Indians, and the 'Untouchables' for separate representation in the legislatures. The Government of India Act, 1919, had extended separate electorates to the Sikhs and had significantly given official recognition to the representation of the 'Untouchables' in the central and provincial legislatures. Their representatives were to be considered as 'nominees' of the Government. Moreover, separate electorates had the seal of consent among the minorities at the First Round Table Conference.

Gandhi did his homework and therefore considered it imperative to confer with the Muslims and other minorities. The Congress prepared a formula in March 1931 on the communal question under which in exchange for their support of mixed electorates, Gandhi vowed to secure for the Muslims one-third seats in the Indian legislatures, much more than the country's one-fourth Muslim-to-Hindu ratio. William L. Shirer, the *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, recounts that Shaukat Ali "had told me […] in Bombay that he had accepted Gandhi's offer, at least provisionally. It would give him and his co-religionists a greater representation in the legislatures than their numbers called for." However, Shaukat Ali, who had been Gandhi's principal aide in the Congress and a fierce champion of Indian independence, had changed his mind. This was apparent as Ali told Shirer (1979: 155-56) that "if the Hindus don't meet [the Muslims'] demands this time, we're going to make war on them." Ali now told Shirer that "Moslems had already drawn up plans to fight the Congress boycott of British goods unless the Hindus give in." They "would counter-picket," Ali said, "the Congress's picketing of shops selling foreign wares." The Congress "believed that [Ali] had secretly sold out to the British" (Shirer 1979: 155). Shirer says that even if Ali "hadn't sold out to the [British], he was acting as if he had." Later, the "loyalist Muslims" met the "nationalist Muslims" at Shimla in June 1931, to iron out their differences. But "the two warring Moslem factions could not get together and their meetings broke up without an accord." Shirer (1979: 156) rightly pointed out "how could they reach an accord with the Congress and the Hindus" at the Conference.

Gandhi also met Ambedkar, the 'Untouchable' leader, personally in Bombay in August 1931, before departing for London to apprise himself about the stand of the 'Untouchables' and, if possible, to reach a position of compromise on the communal question. Ambedkar was forthright in impressing upon Gandhi "that the Congress was not sincere about its profession […]. Had it been sincere, it would have surely made the removal of untouchability a condition" just "like the wearing of khaddar" (Ahir 1995: 38-41). When Ambedkar asked Gandhi what he thought of the debates of the First Round Table Conference, Gandhi replied that he was "against the political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindus" (Ahir 1995: 41). This was a forthright rejection of the 'Untouchable' leaders' stand on separate electorates. In their meeting before departing for London, however, Ambedkar touched a more sordid cord when he said, "Gandhiji, I have no homeland. […] [How] can I call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink?" (Ahir 1995: 40) The statement made Gandhi gauge his opponent. But, to Gandhi, this was not a justification apt enough to demand separate electorates on communal lines from the British Government. Ambedkar believed that the Congress was ready to give only formal recognition to the 'Untouchables'. Ambedkar left the meeting with Gandhi saying "they now knew where they stood" (Ahir 1995: 38-41). No compromise could be reached with the 'Untouchables' by Gandhi on the communal question before the Second Round Table Conference. Later, the same night, Ambedkar declared in a conference of the 'Depressed Classes' in Bombay that "Gandhi was unable to promote their interests. They must stand on their own feet and fight as best as they could for their rights" (Keer 2015: 168-69). According to Eleanor Zelliot (1996: 103), the "unproductive" meeting with Gandhi hardened Ambedkar's attitude towards him. Ambedkar would meet Gandhi in another personal meeting on 27 September 1931, on the eve of the Minorities Sub-Committee meet in London, when he was invited by Gandhi himself. In this meeting, Ambedkar spoke for three hours, while Gandhi, spinning the charkha, listened mutely to him (Omvedt 2004: 43). If Gandhi had nothing to say, why did he invite Ambedkar to call on him? "Maybe," speculates Joseph Lelyveld, "Gandhi had been hoping to find common ground and discovered instead that Ambedkar had stiffened his position" (Lelyveld 2011: 213-14).

Second Session of the Round Table Conference

The Second Round Table Conference started on 7 September 1931, with the Minorities Sub-Committee "charged with the task of finding a workable solution to the growing communal problem" (Roy 2014: 121). The primary stumbling block was a disagreement in the sub-committee itself over the representation of the minorities. Separate electorates on a religious basis were demanded by the Muslim delegates. The Sikhs objected that the solution would not be brought about if the Hindus and the Muslims alone negotiated. The Sikhs pointed out to their own minority status along with the Europeans, the Indian Christians and the 'Untouchables'. Their claims as minorities had to be adjusted in any negotiation. Gandhi and Ambedkar remained irreconcilable opponents on the issue of the 'Untouchables'. The second Conference yielded no consensus or solution to the intricate minorities' representation.

The British Government, on the other hand, had a totally different opinion about how the second session of the Round Table Conference should move ahead with the duty of drafting a new constitution for British India. The British Premier, Ramsay MacDonald, informed the gathered members that the "real challenge before them lay in devising a system of representation whereby power could be equitably shared by different classes, communities and religious groups, before the shape of an independent all-India polity was hammered out" (Government of India 1932, 3: 1358-1386). Following the Prime Minister's remarks, Ambedkar, the 'Depressed Classes' spokesman, presented a memorandum to the Minorities Sub-Committee outlining the fair and equal proportion of seats for the 'Depressed Classes' in the several democratically elected legislatures (Ambedkar 1982, 2: 652-53). Ambedkar was thereby disputing Gandhi's assertion that the Indian National Congress truly represented every community and class in India, including the 'Untouchables'.

Ambedkar's reaction was rooted in an impassioned speech that Gandhi had made before the Federal Structure Committee of the Second Round Table Conference where Gandhi had depicted that the Indian National Congress had an inclusive character. He had named some of the Muslim, Parsi and Christian Presidents that the Congress had chosen, besides spelling out the Congress's commitment for the rights of the minorities, women and the 'Untouchables'. In this speech, Gandhi had emphasised that the Congress was "the oldest political organisation in India, it is what it means – national. It represents no particular community, no

particular class, no particular interest. It claims to represent all Indian interests and classes" (Government of India 1932, 1: 43). When it came to the question of different communities having separate electorates, Gandhi asserted that "the Congress has reconciled itself to special treatment of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh tangle. […] But the Congress will not extend that doctrine in any shape or form [to other communities]" (Ambedkar 1982, 9: 57). Gandhi concluded his address by declaring that he would fiercely oppose any additional special representation be it of the Europeans, the Indian Christians and the 'Untouchables'. However, Gandhi (1956-94, 48: 26-38) conceded that he wanted all the three communities and "certainly the 'Untouchables' in the legislature, and if none were elected, then it would be the duty of the legislature to co-opt them."

Gandhi also extended a proposal to all the community representatives to hold informal discussions among themselves to solve the issue of communal representation. As a logical step in that direction, he went on to request Ramsay MacDonald, the British Prime Minister, to adjourn the formal proceedings of the Second Round Table Conference till the informal discussions were completed. The Aga Khan, Sir Syed Ali Imam and Madan Mohan Malaviya supported the request for adjournment. However, Ambedkar (1982, 9: 57) did not want to relent. He said that "this was nothing but a declaration of war by […] Gandhi and the Congress against the Untouchables." Ambedkar objected to the proposal to adjourn the Conference proceedings and rejected Gandhi's assertion that the 'Untouchables' were represented by the Congress also. He was suspicious that Gandhi was planning to bypass his community and close the issue of the 'Untouchable' representation. He went on to make a passionate appeal. Ambedkar and Gandhi thereafter faced each other as adversaries, both claiming to be the representatives of the 'Untouchables'. Gandhi's assertion that the 'Untouchables' were represented by the Congress was refuted vehemently by Ambedkar, who pointed out that there was no proof for this claim.

The Second Round Table Conference soon got deadlocked on the issue of representation of the minorities. Gandhi lamented that "things looked dark" (Shirer 1979: 187). However, he did not give up. Gandhi had acidly remarked to his fellow countrymen just before the adjournment that they were quarrelling among themselves for a share in the spoils which the British Government had not yet given to them and would never give to them. Gandhi admonished that "by our internal squabbles, we are playing right into the hands of the British [Government]" (Shirer 1979: 192).

The colonial strategy at the second session of the Round Table Conference was to have the Congress attend the Conference and then wreck it through "separatists" groups in order to neutralise Gandhi and his efforts. Leading British policy makers placed their "highest and most permanent hopes in the eternity of the communal situation" (Thursby 1975: 173). Gandhi faced off against a number of notable figures as well as other Indians at the Conference "handpicked by the authorities, to represent those counterpoised constituencies of class, community and religion, upon whom the British relied to retard the constitutional progress of India" (Kumar 1987: 93). Gandhi nailed the mischief in this strategy when he remarked, "as I studied the list of Indian delegates here, I suddenly realised that they were not the chosen ones of the nation but chosen ones of the Government" (Hunt 1978: 149).

Gandhi's Quest for Unity

Gandhi volunteered to hold informal meetings in succession with the minorities – the Muslims, the Sikhs and the 'Untouchables' – and to work in such a manner as to submerge their differences until they learnt what the British Government was granting to India. He stressed, "let us make a united demand to the British Government," and suggested "to discuss its decision on our political demands for self-Government, leaving such matters as separate electorates and special representation for the minorities to be settled either by an impartial tribunal or by a special convention of Indian leaders, elected by their constituencies" (Shirer 1979: 186).

The Muslim delegation at the Second Round Table Conference was in an uncompromising mood and the 'separatists' among them were opposed to any settlement with the Hindus until all of their demands were conceded. In addition, they now began to advocate and support the claim for separate electorates for the other minorities, groups which included the Anglo-Indians, the Europeans, the Indian Christians, and, significantly, the 'Untouchables', that is, all the community representatives who had joined the Muslims to sign the Minorities Pact. Proposing separate electorates for the 'Depressed Classes' indicated that the 'separatist' Muslims were advocating for the 'Untouchables' to be separated from the Hindus! Dhananjay Keer (2015: 154) has argued that the Muslims "feared that [if] the caste Hindus and the Untouchable Hindus [became] a united force" they together would "oppose their demands." But if the 'Untouchables' got separated from the majority Hindus, that

would make the proportion of Muslims much larger in British India. This was the politics of numbers and the 'separatist' Muslims at the Second Round Table Conference were playing with the other minorities against vital national interest.

It seems that the Muslim demands were presented to arrive at a common action plan. In the attendance of many Indian representatives, the Aga Khan was claimed to have told Gandhi that if the Indian National Congress or the Hindus consented to the Muslim wants, the whole Muslim population would be willing to join Gandhi in the political fight for freedom (Noorani 2015). Such an "alliance could only be for combating every force that was inimical to India's freedom," as Gandhi believed that it was vital to combat not only the separatist movements, but also the mentality of separateness, regardless of its origins (Gandhi 1956-94, 1: 329).

According to William L. Shirer (1979: 186), Gandhi met the Muslims night after night and even indicated that an agreement between them was near. However, Gandhi's willingness to accept the Muslim proposals at the Round Table Conference's informal gatherings was conditional on two things. First, Gandhi stated that he would only endorse Muslim requests on his own behalf. He would endeavour to gain, but not absolutely guarantee, Indian National Congress's endorsement of his viewpoint. Second, that the Muslims would refrain from supporting the claims of the 'Depressed Classes' for separate electorates. There was a rider attached to the two conditions – that the Muslims would not stand in their way should Gandhi and the 'Depressed Classes' reach an agreement. According to Muhammad Iqbal's (1944: 190-92) testimony, the Muslims were not to support, rather than 'oppose' the claims of the 'Untouchables'. Political unity was required in order to achieve a political goal, which for Gandhi, as for any other Indian, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or otherwise, could only be "total independence" in the broadest sense of the word.

Ambedkar (1990, 8: 364-65), who published the full text of what he called the "Congress-Muslim Pact," believed that the agreement initiated at the Second Round Table Conference to be Gandhi's "climb-down." He believed that Gandhi himself "expressed his willingness to concede most of the Muslim demands [through informal meetings] which the Congress leaders in the All-Parties Conference had dismissed out of hand only three years earlier" (Nanda 2010: 155). Ambedkar was supported by newspapers which published that Gandhi had agreed to the Muslims' fourteen demands, their majority in Bengal and the Punjab, and the principle

of federating provinces (Keer 2015: 176). Ambedkar (1990, 8: 364) accused Gandhi of a fallout, as he "was prepared to give everything to the Muslims on the condition that the Muslims agreed to side with him in opposing the claims of the Depressed Classes, the Indian Christians and the Anglo-Indians for special representation." Ambedkar increasingly believed that instead of unifying the Indian delegation at the second session of the Round Table Conference, Gandhi widened the breach (Ambedkar 1991, 9: 55).

The informal meetings held outside the Second Round Table Conference and presided over by Gandhi, proved abortive. The Conference's deliberations came to a halt when the participants were unable to achieve a consensus on either the constitution or community representation. Before creating a new constitution, the Muslim representatives demanded that the issue of separate electorates be resolved (Nanda 2010: 156). The 'Untouchables', represented by Ambedkar, lined up with the Muslims. Like the Muslims and the Sikhs, they also demanded satisfactory solution to their claims before any constitutional advance. The Minorities Sub-Committee could not arrive at any decision, unanimous or otherwise. It was adjourned indefinitely giving leeway to the London newspapers which began to express their pleasure at the break-up of the Conference in its second session and deflation of Gandhi, whom they blamed for the failure. James Louis Garvin, editor of *The Observer* concluded that Gandhi's "exalted and unconstructive ideology suggests the breaking and not the making of India" (Shirer 1979: 192). William Shirer (1979: 186), who was associated with Gandhi in 1931, however, argues that "behind the scenes, the British were doing their best to prevent an understanding between [the Hindus and the Muslims]."

An editorial in the *News Chronicle* wrote, "[powerful] influences are at work in [Britain] which would make the Indian communal differences an effective excuse for breaking up the Conference altogether" (Shirer 1979: 186). William Shirer (1979: 186) recounts that such influences became more bolder and more public. This became evident when the Tory members gathered in the House of Commons on the evening of 1 October 1931, with the intention to convince an invited group of Indian Muslims that "their future would best be served in an India still ruled by the British Raj and not by the Hindus." Led by Lord Lloyd and Lord Brentford, the British Tory members of the Parliament were assuring the Muslims of India that if they remained loyal to the Crown, they would be properly rewarded by (1) according them important role in building

up the Indian Army, and (2) bestowing on them a greater role in the central and provincial legislatures. The British would never let them down, "never permit them to be dominated by the Hindus." Shirer graphically recounts that "[it] was pretty strong stuff" (Shirer 1979: 187). According to Sumit Sarkar (1983: 319), the Muslim delegates at the Conference were cultivated by the British parliamentarians like Sir Edward Benthall, who was able to secure Muslim loyalty in exchange for a guarantee that "we [could] not forget their economic plight in Bengal and […] do what we can to find places for them in European firms." The Muslims, led by Mohammad Shafi and Shaukat Ali, were overwhelmed. "You [British] grant us our demands and we will remain loyal subjects of the King and Emperor," Ali said (Shirer 1979: 186).

Ambedkar forwarded an uncharitable criticism of Gandhi when the negotiations failed to materialise at the Second Round Table Conference. According to Dhananjay Keer (2015: 185), "the Muslims dropped Gandhi's proposal because they refused to betray the other minorities." Ambedkar believed that Gandhi would never permit the Conference to assign "a separate communal political status" to the 'Untouchables' for which he had been fighting and he believed had achieved considerable success at the Conference (Gupta 1985: 275). Ambedkar (1991, 9: 74) was also aware that "the Musalmans who were out to demand safeguards for themselves could not stand up and oppose the demands of the Untouchables." Gandhi's unwillingness to provide protection to the 'Untouchables' as well as other minorities other than the Muslims and Sikhs, according to Trilok Nath, was a major stumbling block at the Conference, as "the Muslims would stand by all minorities" (Nath 1987: 137-38). As a result, it was recognised that the communal element would certainly remain a component of the newly proposed Indian constitution. Even the Minorities Sub-Committee, headed by the British Premier, was unanimous in assuring the minorities that their interests would not be prejudiced (Revankar 1971: 71).

A divided Hindu community was to the advantage of both the British Government and the Indian Muslims. The Muslims feared losing their number game if the 'caste Hindus' and the 'Depressed Classes' joined hands. Similarly, a very open, active and all-out support of the British Government to the 'Depressed Classes' could prove dangerous to British rule. It would have earned the hostility of Hindu communalists on the one hand, and on the other, would have, most likely, pushed the Hindus and their supporters to the Congress camp, spurring at least seventy per cent of India's population against

imperialism. Therefore, the British Government pushed forward their support to the Muslims, who the British believed were shrewd enough to not reject the demand of the 'Untouchables' for separate electorates. The big British game was to keep the 'Untouchables', the Muslims, and the Hindus divided, so that the Government could proclaim that it was futile for it to make any proposal on its own until the Indians agreed among themselves on what they wanted.

Trilok Nath and Sumit Sarkar are of the opinion that the talks in the Conference failed on the Muslim-Sikh question. Nath (1987: 137) argues that Gandhi's strategy to bridge the gap between the Sikhs and the Muslims by meeting their demands "could not take off because of Sikh and Muslim distrust […] of each other." Sarkar (1983: 319-20) further writes that while "the Muslim delegates bluntly rejected [Gandhi's] offer, […] [his] generosity was certainly not shared by the [Hindu] Mahasabha delegates, who along with the Sikhs bitterly opposed anything that could give a majority to the Muslims in the Punjab." Dhananjay Keer (2015: 185) puts the responsibility on the Muslim leaders for the communal deadlock. He claims that the Muslim leaders had an unspoken strategy of dragging the Hindu representatives to a point of understanding and, finally, turning to the colonial state for greater concessions. They were well aware that only the colonial state had the authority to grant. According to Keer (2015: 185), the Muslims made extraordinary efforts in order to obtain separate electorates. The Sikhs, on the other hand, insisted that the Indian constitution's provisions for the Sikhs not be revoked or amended without their explicit assent. The issue of separate versus joint electorates for the 'Untouchables' was decided through voting. On the subject of separate electorates for the 'Untouchables', the Minorities Sub-Committee had a split vote. The suggestion to introduce separate electorates for the 'Depressed Classes' was defeated with fifteen votes against and ten votes in favour of the proposal (Desai 2009, 3: 22).

Gandhi, Ambedkar and 'Untouchables'

The Second Round Table Conference has been aptly described by Pyarelal (1932: 5) as a "sordid drama of 'high diplomacy', wire-pulling and intrigue." The British strategy for avoiding any serious commitment to Indian self-rule was working. Despite Gandhi's pleadings, the British Government had not uttered one word about how far it would go in granting India self-rule, whereas the "Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Christians and the Untouchables fairly flew at each

other's throats" (Shirer 1979: 186). The result was a standstill in the Conference which the British welcomed. The British Premier recognised that the Conference was unable to reach an agreement on a real solution to the minorities' problem. On 8 October 1931, Gandhi reported to the Minorities Sub-Committee, with profound regret, his absolute failure to get an acceptable resolution to the communal situation by means of informal meetings amongst and with the leaders of various communities. To him, the Indian delegation's constitution was one of the reasons for its failure, since they were not chosen members of the groups or organisations they were supposed to represent, but rather Government 'nominees'. At the same time, Gandhi expressed disappointment that individuals whose attendance was absolutely crucial for a settlement to be reached were not present at the Conference (Government of India 1932, 1: 530-31).

A fundamental disagreement arose between Gandhi and Ambedkar in the Minorities Sub-Committee of the Second Round Table Conference as to how the problem of the 'Untouchables' was to be resolved. In the First Round Table Conference, Ambedkar was successful in gaining a proposal of separate electorates for the 'Untouchables'. Gandhi was adamantly against the concept of separate electorates for the 'Untouchables' at the second Conference in 1931. David Hardiman (2005: 131) argues that "Gandhi had a strong case, as distinct electorates for Muslims had undoubtedly been divisive, creating as they did a class of politicians whose basis was that of separatist politics." Hardiman adds that Ambedkar's position also had a strong justification: "the interests of the Dalits, who were in a minority everywhere, would be submerged in the politics of the majority." Ambedkar was convinced that recognition of the distinct and separate entity of the 'Untouchables' and the grant of separate electorates were sine qua non for the elevation of their political, social and economic status. However, separate electorates for the 'Untouchables' was contrary to all that Gandhi had worked for. He and other reformist 'caste Hindus' had broken the barrier of untouchability and built a slender bridge on which many 'caste Hindus' and the 'Untouchables' were courageously walking. A separate electorate would restore the barrier, weaken the bridge and reverse the reform process among the 'caste Hindus'. Worst of all, separate electorates would "divide the Hindu community into armed camps," (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 161) and expose the 'Untouchables' to greater hostility. Such measures, Gandhi argued, could only be proposed by people who were unaware of India's social problems or, worse, had a negative attitude toward it.

Contrary to Gail Omvedt's (1994: 172) assertion that Gandhi was not only ignorant of the division that existed in the villages between the 'caste Hindus' and the 'Depressed Classes', but also of the violence in the lives of the 'Untouchables', Gandhi's speech at the Indian Majlis at Oxford (Britain), shows how accurately he knew the condition of the 'Untouchables'. In his speech, Gandhi explained, "Muslims and Sikhs are all well organised. The Untouchables are not. There is very little political consciousness among them and they are so horribly treated that I [Gandhi] want to save them against themselves. If they had separate electorates, their lives would be miserable in the villages, which are the strongholds of Hindu orthodoxy. […] By giving them separate electorates, you will throw the apple of discord between the Untouchables and the orthodox. […] It would be a positive danger for the Untouchables. I am certain that the question of separate electorates for the Untouchables is a modern manufacture of a Satanic Government" (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 223-24). During his discussions at 'Friends House', Gandhi had signalled that he was one "who feels with them and knows their life" and added that "the 'Untouchables' are in the hands of superior classes. They can suppress them completely and wreak vengeance upon the 'Untouchables' who are at their mercy. […] [How] can I invite utter destruction for them? I would not be guilty of that crime" (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 258). He was convinced that separate electorates to the 'Depressed Classes' would do them no good but do much harm. At the same time, Gandhi argued that if adult franchise was granted, it would put millions of 'Depressed Classes' on the voters' list which no Indian political party could afford to ignore.

The British Government had introduced "the pernicious concept of separate electorates to divide the Indian society irreparably at the very initial stages of modern electoral politics" (Mukherjee 2013: 34). As a result, elections and legislative councils had become a battleground for communal rivalries. Since the electors were supposed to be solely members of one community, the contestants were not required to obtain votes from members of other communities. Consequently, communities began thinking and end up voting communally, and they began to sense communal power and development, as well as voice their socio-economic concerns in communal terms (Chandra 2008: 310). Gandhi was conscious that such a policy was not based on equitable representation and contained the seeds of division capable of retarding the progress of the entire country. For these reasons, Gandhi believed that introducing separate electorates for the 'Depressed Classes' would benefit the British Raj. This weakens the argument of Arundhati Roy, Christophe Jaffrelot, and others, that

at the Second Round Table Conference, Gandhi basically supported the 'upper-caste Hindus', and hence was opposed to accommodate the demands of the 'Untouchables'. In fact, Gandhi had promised at the Conference that he would have the most drastic legislation enacted against the disabilities to which the 'Untouchables' were subjected. He had also acknowledged that "the informal work of discovering a true solution of the communal problem […] must continue" (Ambedkar 1982, 2: 660).

Ambedkar disagreed with Gandhi's contentions as he believed that to exclude the 'Depressed Classes' was the very essence of Hinduism. "The caste Hindus excluded the Untouchables as a matter of faith. They looked upon the latter as an enemy. The enmity between the two was permanent" (Ambedkar 1991, 9: 192-94). Ambedkar (1991, 9: 193-94) also insisted that "there was no chance of a harmonious ideology developing, no chance of a common outlook developing which took account for the interests of all." Arundhati Roy (2015: 168) argues that to Ambedkar, without the 'Untouchables' developing into a political electorate with its own elected members, caste would become even more ingrained. Ambedkar thought that reserving seats for the 'Untouchables' within the Congress or, within the 'Hindu fold' would only create obedient candidates – servants who understood how to satisfy their masters, Roy continues. Christophe Jaffrelot (2005: 54) fully accepts this view. He emphasises that separate electorates would very certainly have given the 'Untouchables' with their own legislators, transforming them into a mainstream political force. Reserved seats, on the other hand, opened the door for higher caste-dominated organisations to co-opt the 'Untouchables', distributing electoral tickets and getting them elected, even if this went against the views of the 'Untouchables'. Roy and Jaffrelot's viewpoint resonate with what the Viceroy, Lord Minto, had expressed to the Muslim delegation in 1906. He had approved the views that in bodies such as the legislative councils a Muslim elected with Hindu votes would sacrifice his views "to those of a majority opposed to his community" (Gopal 1964: 338).

Signing of the Minorities Pact

With no consensus being reached on the communal question at the Second Round Table Conference, Gandhi focused his efforts on quickly ironing out the essentials of a new constitution, rather than allowing the Conference's work to be stymied by the impasse in the Minorities Sub-Committee. However, not only did the British

Government refuse to spell out a timetable for India's independence at the Conference, they also questioned the Congress's right to speak for all of India by pointing to the delegates opposed to Gandhi and the Congress. To the delight of the British officials, leaders of various 'separatist' communities, including the Europeans, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Sikhs, and Muslims joined Ambedkar to build a unified front of anti-Congress minorities. Their purpose was to prevent the Conference from endorsing Gandhi's proposals. They came up with an understanding, the so-called 'Minorities Pact', that circumvented Gandhi and was presented to the Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. An additional memorandum was appended to the Minorities Pact, drafted by Srinivasan and Ambedkar, the 'Untouchable' delegates at the Conference. In the memorandum, separate electorates were requested for the 'Depressed Classes'. The addendum also said that if reserved seats in a joint electorate system were to be implemented, it should be done only after a referendum and after a twenty-year term (Ambedkar 1982, 2: 669-72). The Europeans also joined the Muslims and other minorities in signing the Pact. The memorandum was endorsed by Sir Hubert Carr, a British member of the Minorities Sub-Committee, Sir Henry Gidney, Rao Bahadur Pannirselvam, B.R. Ambedkar, and the Aga Khan, indicating that the Minorities Pact had both the implicit and the explicit backing of the Government. "Ambedkar had behaved very well at the Conference," Sir Samuel Hoare informed the Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, on 28 December 1932, "and I am most anxious to strengthen his hands in every reasonable way" (MSS EUR E240/10).

Sir Hubert Carr, the representative of the Anglo-Indians, believed that Gandhi's failure had resulted in bringing the minorities together. Gandhi (1947: 37) replied to this charge thus: "I will not deprive Sir Hubert Carr and his associates of the feeling of satisfaction that evidently actuates to them, but, in my opinion, what they have done is to sit by the carcass [India], and they have performed the laudable feat of dissecting the carcass." As for the document produced by the leaders of the minorities, Gandhi said, it was designed not to achieve "responsible Government" but to share power with the bureaucracy. Gandhi had a point, as Ambedkar (1987, 3: 661-63) pointed out at the Conference that the 'Untouchables' "are not anxious, they are not clamorous, they have not started any movement for claiming that there shall be immediate transfer of power from the British to the Indian people." Surinder Kumar Gupta (1985: 273) argues that "the representatives of the Depressed Classes continued to hold on tightly to the ground they had prepared in the first session of the

Conference. They did not budge an inch from their stand. Instead, their separatist attitude got stiffened." An American observer wrote, "Gandhi's voice is only one against many. They may be small fry and the Mahatma may be speaking on behalf of a most influential organisation. [He] should have brought a strong contingent of representatives of the nationalist sections of great minorities" (Keer 2015: 184).

The British Government had the Aga Khan to proclaim that the Muslims were different from, that their interests were divergent from those of the Hindus, that they stood apart from, and indeed were opposed to the national movement for freedom. Ambedkar was chosen by the British as the 'Depressed Classes' spokesperson. Ambedkar was much more certain about the 'Depressed Classes' being distinct from the 'caste Hindus', that, like the interests of the Muslims, their interests were not just different from but were eternally opposed to the interests of the 'caste Hindus', and that Gandhi could not speak for them. Given this homework, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, could confidently tell the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, on 2 October 1931, that "the delegates are much further off with each other than they were last year and I don't believe that there is a least chance of a communal settlement in the Minorities Committee" (MSS EUR E240/1). Writing to Sir George Stanley, the Governor of Madras, on 24 September 1933, the Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, remarked, "during the last two or three years, I have seen a great deal of Ambedkar, and, like most of my friends, I have been impressed by his ability and his manifest desire to support the British influence in India. He has had a big fight, first of all with Gandhi and, secondly, with the caste Hindus, and on the whole, he seems to me to have come out of it well" (MSS EUR E240/10).

The Minorities Pact was a triumph of the British strategy of divide and rule by counterpoising communities. Under this Pact, the 'Untouchables' were conceded fewer seats than their proportion to the Indian population. Only 180 seats were set aside for the 'Untouchables' out of an aggregate of 1100 provincial councils' seats, whereas they should have been allotted 209 seats on the basis of constituting at least nineteen percent of the population of British India. Muslims, who make up 21.5 percent of the total population, were allocated 338 seats instead of the 237 seats they were supposed to get. Why, therefore, would Ambedkar and Srinivasan allow such low numbers of 'Untouchable' seats in provincial legislatures? *The Tribune* (25 March 1932) reported later that Ambedkar and Srinivasan

agreed to the Minorities Pact because of "the promise of weightage given to them in their provinces," while those professing to represent Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, Muslims, and others all worked together to weaken Ambedkar's position. Eleanor Zelliot (1988: 190) argues that the Second "Round Table Conference found the Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, and Indian Christians all demanding separate electorates to guarantee their political rights," and it was "in this context [that] Ambedkar demanded a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes." Ambedkar just followed the others.

Ramsay MacDonald, the British Premier, asked the Indian parties to send him a signed request asking for his help to settle the communal question (Government of India 1932, 3: 1385-1386). Gandhi refused to sign such a request and to be party to such a submission (Nayar 1996 7: 380). His objection had a sound basis. Gandhi contended that Ramsay MacDonald would be resolving disputes in his official power as the Prime Minister of the Government of India, rather than in his individual capacity. The Indian National Congress would not accept any arbitration by the Government in the solution of the communal issue for that would mean, Gandhi opined, "selling the country," as "no Government in the nature of things would suggest a solution unfavourable to themselves" (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 257-58).

Gandhi's Stand on 'Untouchable' Representation

The Minorities Pact was announced on 13 November 1931, signed by Ambedkar and the Aga Khan, among others. This Pact demanded separate electorates in the legislatures for the Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Indian-based Europeans and the 'Untouchables'. Speaking at the meeting, Gandhi admonished the British Government for having egged on the minority groups to press their demands. He reminded the Government that it had not convened the Round Table Conference for settling the communal question, but for starting a process of constitution building. Arguing that a separate electorate for the 'Untouchables' means "the perpetual bar sinister," as it would entrench the division in every village, Gandhi added, "I would not sell the vital interests of the Untouchables even for the sake of winning the freedom of India." Gandhi ended the meeting with a declaration: "I want to say with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing, I would resist it with my life" (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 298). Gandhi told William Shirer that he had never felt more humiliated (Shirer 1979: 194).

When a questioner told Gandhi in London that the stubborn fact against him was that he was not an 'Untouchable', Gandhi replied, "I know it very well" (Gandhi 1956-94, 48: 161).

Gandhi's disapproval to the expansion of separate electorates to the 'Depressed Classes' is seen by Bidyut Chakrabarty (2006: 106) as double-edged, as it would have "split the Untouchables from the Hindu community and absolved the latter of its moral responsibility to fight against the practice of untouchability." Bhikhu Parekh (1997: 18) concentrates on political calculations that determined Gandhi's actions – "separate electorates would have reduced the numerical strength of the Hindu majority, encouraged minority alliance against it, and fragment the country yet further." Therefore, Gandhi's participation at the Second Round Table Conference was the outcome of deft political tactics and his deep concern for India's unity.

Yet, there are critics who have been less than favourable in viewing Gandhi's role at the Second Round Table Conference. He has been criticised by historians for his stubborn, obstinate, and uncompromising behaviour. It is also stated that if only Gandhi had agreed to seats being reserved in the Indian legislatures for the 'Untouchables', they would have reconciled to joint electorates. Eleanor Zelliot (1996: 166) argues that Ambedkar had to "[confront] Gandhi, [as he] not only refused to consider separate electorates for the Depressed Classes but also opposed any form of [their] special representation involving reserved seats." Trilok Nath and Dhananjay Keer (2015: 196) support this view. Nath (1987: 134) asserts that "Gandhi felt unable to throw in his lot with those who held" that the 'Depressed Classes' must be granted "reservation of seats in general electorates," otherwise "the problem would have been solved long before" (Keer 2015: 181). Moreover, Nishikant Kolge (2017: 172) argues that Gandhi "was not [against] [...] separate electorate alone; he was [against] [...] any kind of special arrangements or any kind of separate political representation for the Untouchables, that is, a separate electorate, a joint electorate with reserved seats or reserved seats." Gail Omvedt (2004: 44) says that "Gandhi denied empowerment and political protection of the Dalits." This was because, as Arundhati Roy (2014: 129-30) puts it: Gandhi viewed the 'Untouchables' in need of "missionary ministration," and not "political representation" because "[it] was an antithetical, intimidating idea to Gandhi" to conceive that the Untouchables who "had been physiologically hardwired into the caste system, too, might need to be roused." Tanika Sarkar (2011: 182) concurs with

the arguments against Gandhi and says that Gandhi believed that "the Untouchables should seek [to] transform […] their condition neither by legal redress nor by political autonomy." This was because while Ambedkar's leadership of the 'Untouchables' was "natural, actual, and practical," (Keer 2015: 182) because he "had grown up in India as an Untouchable," (Roy 2015: 169) Gandhi's leadership was "sentimental and assumed," (Keer 2015: 182) as he needed "to travel all the way to South Africa to learn about humiliation and social segregation" (Roy 2015: 169).

Gandhi's critics, however, overlook the fact that Gandhi was never ever opposed to the 'Depressed Classes' being represented in the legislature, much less to their over-representation. Quite the contrary, he was concerned about ensuring that they were properly represented. He also stated that he was willing to guarantee by legislation that a certain number of seats would be occupied by them. The official transcripts of the Second Round Table Conference sessions attest to this. Quoting from the resolution of the Congress Working Committee, Gandhi (1956-94, 48: 257-58) stated that the Congress was devoted to adult suffrage and that no other franchise could be supported. It advocated "for joint electorates as the foundation for any new constitution, with seats reserved for the minority communities" in the North West Frontier Province (N.W.F.P.) Punjab, Assam, Sind, and anywhere else where minorities make up less than "twenty-five percent of the total population." Gandhi emphasised that the viewpoint of the Indian National Congress on the issue "was one of the greatest possible accommodation." Having explained the Congress position, Gandhi also stated that if the Congress's viewpoint was unpalatable to the minorities, it would be willing to support any alternative reasonable arrangement that would be agreeable to all parties. He further clarified his position by saying that "[it] seems to have been represented that I am opposed to any representation of the Untouchables. What I have said, and what I must repeat, is that I am opposed to their special representation" (Government of India 1932, 1: 119). Gandhi (1956-94, 48: 161) also informed a questioner during the Second Round Table Conference that, while he declared at the Conference to speak for the 'Untouchables', they must have "their own representatives, drawn from their own class" in the assemblies. This "was a hint that [Gandhi] might agree to reserved seats" (Gandhi 1995: 250). But no particular programme for constitutional seat reservation for Gandhi's approval or rejection by representatives of the 'Untouchables' was presented to him (Pyarelal 1932: 12).

Conclusion

The colonial viewpoint assiduously fostered the idea that the Round Table Conference was a failure due to communal antagonism among the Indians, as they could not reach an amicable settlement on the communal problem by themselves (Government of India, 1932b). It is also generally believed that Gandhi returned "empty-handed" from the Second Round Table Conference (Nayar 1996: 406). However, such impressions are reflective of the inordinate colonial designs to divert attention from those colonial imperatives that prolonged British rule in India. The reality was that not one, but two issues remained unresolved at the Conference – (1) the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh question, and (2) the fate of the 'Depressed Classes'. While the British Government harped on the theme of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh disagreements at the Conference, the fact was that it created more difficulties for India as regards the interests of the 'Depressed Classes'. Gandhi refused to be a part of this exercise. He quit the Conference in its second session, the only session he attended, and returned to India more strengthened in his resolve than before to continue his fight both against colonial rule, unjustifiably holding India to the Empire, and untouchability.

Notes

1. 'Antyaj', 'Bhangi', 'Dalit', 'Depressed Classes', 'Dhed', 'Harijan', 'Panchama', 'Pariah', 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Untouchable' are several names for the same people. They are a group of several castes; themselves divided from one another, the common factor being their very low economic and social condition. The category 'Depressed Classes' was used before 1935 by the British Government. After 1935, the term 'Scheduled Castes' was and continues to be used for official purposes. The term 'Untouchable' was in use throughout the twentieth century. The name 'Harijan' was used mainly by Gandhi and people associated with the national movement led by the Congress. I have used the term 'Untouchable' as well as the other designations as they were in use in different historical conjunctures. I am aware of the derogatory connotations of some of them and do not in any way subscribe to them.

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