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Poona Pact

WHEN GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR CAME TOGETHER TO SETTLE THE DALIT QUESTION

The agreement defeated British attempts to divide Indian society by proposing community-based electorates to create a fissure in the national movement





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It has now become a fashion among many to denounce Gandhi's "fast-unto-death" against the Communal Award that granted separate electorates to 'Dalits' (then described as the 'Depressed Classes') and the Poona Pact of 1932 as the "greatest betrayal" of the 'Dalits'.

Rather than seeing the talks between Gandhi and Ambedkar leading to the signing of the Pact as a dialogue of negotiation between the two, Ambedkar is seen as having been "blackmailed" by Gandhi's fast into dropping the idea of separate electorates in exchange for reservation for the 'Dalits'.

This view essentially overlooks the constant efforts of the British imperialists to divide Indian people into a number of special-interest groups at loggerheads with each other to weaken the national movement.

It is also forgotten that the Poona Pact greatly increased the representation of the 'Dalits' in the legislatures. Ambedkar not only highly praised Gandhi but called him "Mahatma". Ambedkar referred to Gandhi as "Mahatma" for offering "a much better deal for the Dalits in terms of reserved seats than Ambedkar himself had asked or hoped for".

Moreover, the newspapers of the day also tell a similar story. Headlines hailing the Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Gandhi quote Ambedkar as saying: "I am grateful to Mahatma: He came to my rescue."

Bhagwan Das, a close follower of Ambedkar, independently quotes Ambedkar's speech: "I think in all these negotiations, a large part of the credit must be attributed to Mahatma Gandhi himself. I must confess that I was surprised, immensely surprised, when I met Mahatma, that there was so much in common between him and me."

What was common was that both were fighters against untouchability. Indeed, Gandhi recommended that *Annihilation of Caste* must be read by every reformer.

On August 16, 1932, the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, announced the Communal Award, which provided for separate communal electorates for the 'Dalits', the Muslims, the Europeans, the Sikhs, the Anglo-Indians and the Indian-based Christians. The Communal Award, purportedly providing the basis for a responsible government in India through a communal settlement, was in reality an official settlement that would break up the Indian electorate.

The Award of 1932 was built on the notion of separate electorates that the British government had already put in place through the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919).

The 'pernicious concept' of separate electorates introduced by the British government in India divided the Indian society irreparably at the very initial stages of modern electoral politics. Inherent in it was the two (or more) nation theory.

Separate electorates were the cause of communal disputes during elections and in the legislative councils, as the voters and the candidates being members of a single community, the contestants in the elections did not have to get votes from other communities.

The voters, too, then tended to "think and vote communally" — which unfortunately is again becoming a sad reality of our current political scenario — and had begun to "express their socio-economic grievances in communal terms."

Gandhi was, therefore, convinced that separate electorates for 'Dalits' would further help the British to "divide and rule," and balkanise India

Gandhi was, therefore, convinced that separate electorates for 'Dalits' would further help the British to "divide and rule," and balkanise India. He had a strong case, as "distinct electorates for the Muslims in India had undoubtedly been divisive, creating as they did a class of politicians whose basis was that of separatist politics." It was for this reason that he opposed separate electorates for the 'Dalits'.

Correspondence also ensued between the Viceroy of India, Lord Willingdon, and the Governor of Bombay, Sir Frederick Sykes, highlighting the government's position on the issue. Willingdon wrote that the British aim was "of course to detach the people of the province from the Congress movement, to get them interested in reforms and to restore normal conditions as soon as possible."

Sykes agreed that the British should come down on the minorities' side for "there is some hope that the minorities will organise on the British side." By April 1932, three months before the announcement of the Communal Award, Sykes was telling Willingdon that "it is only by helping people to lose faith in the ultimate supremacy of the Congress that we can hope to encourage other parties to organise themselves in such a way as to form a strong effective opposition in the future."

Sykes emphasised in a letter written to Willingdon on June 7, 1932 that for political purposes, the "Untouchables should be considered as a community distinct from the Hindus and their representation should be treated as a subtraction from the Hindu vote." He also desired, as he wrote to the Viceroy, that there should be no attempt made now to win over the Congress, for "any such attempt will inevitably estrange the Muslims and other minorities."

The demand for separate electorates for the 'Dalits', as enshrined in the Communal Award, was in fact "manufactured" by the Government. E.E. Doyle, the Inspector General of Prisons, reported that Gandhi told him that the 'Dalits' "had been given separate electorates, when as a class they did not desire them. A very small minority, the Mahars, under the leadership of Ambedkar demanded separate electorates, but they were not entitled to speak for the Depressed Classes as a whole, who in the United Provinces, Bengal and elsewhere had definitely declared for joint electorates."

The confidential correspondence among the British officials was reflective of what Gandhi was saying. The correspondence shows that there was no widespread yearning among the 'Dalits' for seeking separate electorates through the Communal Award.

In fact, majority of them scarcely knew that an Award had been announced ostensibly for their "emancipation." The British put on the pretence of "supporting" the 'Dalits', while their clearly stated objective was to use them to create yet another fissure among the Indian people in order to thwart the rising tide of the national movement. Separate electorate was a key device to make the 'Dalits' assert their separateness, a devise the British had used successfully to divide the Hindus and the Muslims since the late 19th century.

Gandhi was aware of the British Government's machinations: several years later, in a letter written to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, he was to describe the Communal Award as a "wicked conspiracy against Indian nationalism."

He added that the Award sought to create "a division amongst Hindus themselves." Gandhi insisted that the 'Dalits' be elected through joint, and if possible, a wider electorate, through universal adult franchise. There were reasons for this belief, as separate electorates would ensure that the "Untouchables remained Untouchables in perpetuity," while what was needed, Gandhi asserted, was the "root and branch eradication of untouchability."



Gandhi with people from the Harijan community

Gandhi had challenged the Communal Award, as it divided the Indian people and weakened the national movement, but the British government and Gandhi's critics translate this as unwillingness to empower the 'Dalits'.

Further, Gandhi, in reply to some of the critics on this issue, argued: "To say that the *harijans* will not be able to use their franchise properly and will not be able to understand the interests of the country is to lay the axe at the very root of the principles of democracy. It is like the Imperialists telling us that we are not fit for democracy and will never learn the proper use of the franchise. Mistakes will always be made. We shall progress only through mistakes. But does it mean that we should not have the right to vote? Exercise of the right of voting will in itself be an education for the harijans. Nor would it be proper to say that they would not understand national interests."

Gandhi had never objected to the representation of the 'Dalits' in the legislatures or even to their over-representation. On the contrary, he was anxious to secure their adequate representation. Gandhi even expressed his readiness, under certain conditions, to guarantee by statute, a specified number of seats to be filled by them.

Gandhi had requested the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, to publish his letter addressed to him, indicating his intentions to go on "fast unto death," arguing that he wanted "public opinion to be affected" against separate electorates.

The government released the correspondence on September 13, 1932, a week before Gandhi was to start his fast. It sent shock waves all over the country. The country was stunned on learning that Gandhi had decided to "fast-unto-death" on the issue of awarding separate electorates to the 'Dalits'.

The fast immediately pricked 'caste Hindu' conscience and, on the initiative of Madan Mohan Malaviya, attempts were made to initiate a dialogue between the representative Hindu leaders, including Tej Bahadur Sapru, Ghanshyam Das Birla and Chakravarti Rajagopalachari among others, on the one hand, and Ambedkar and other 'Dalit' leaders on the other.

Meanwhile, the British Government was actively involved in manipulating the 'Dalit' leaders. M.C. Rajah wrote in his letter to Gandhi: "Perhaps not all of them know how much pressure was brought to bear upon me by high government authorities including the Viceroy, the Home Member, and the Indian Law Member at the time of the fast to prevent me from advocating and inducing my people to accept joint electorates upon which your heart was set and without which life was not worth living for you."

The government continued its 'indirect' publicity to thwart any attempt towards an agreement between the 'untouchable' and Hindu representatives. Anticipating that the agreement may be a possibility, the government even declared that Rajah and Ambedkar were "not the only spokesmen of the Depressed Classes" and the government may require evidence that any arrangement that the Depressed Classes may come to "has the support of their communities as a whole."

The period from 1947 to 1951 saw an unexpected and remarkable rapprochement between Gandhi and Ambedkar

However, at long last, the leaders reached an arrangement called the Poona Pact and the terms were reported to Gandhi. He gave his approval. The text was communicated to the Government of India at once and the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and his ministers now accepted it as an amendment to the Communal Award. On September 26, 1932, after the news of the changes reached Yeravda Jail, Gandhi broke his fast.

By virtue of the Poona Pact, 'Dalits' were given 148 seats in the Legislatures as against the 71 which they had received under the government's Award. The more significant change was in the way the 'Dalits' legislators were to be elected. The election was to be in two stages.

In the first round, the 'Dalits' in the reserved constituency were to elect a panel of four candidates. In the second round, all voters of the constituency, irrespective of caste, were to elect the person they wanted to be their representative. The agreement followed what Gandhi had maintained all along, namely, that he would give any concession whatsoever to thwart the manoeuvre of the British to divide the Hindu community permanently.

However, the most significant gain was that the Poona Pact was arrived at by and among Indians themselves without any participation of the official British side.

Moreover, in working out a solution to secure an alternate formula, Ambedkar said, "To save Gandhi's life, I would not be party to any proposals that would be against the interests of my people."

In fact, Ambedkar saw the Poona Pact as a victory for himself. He wrote, "The fast failed and Gandhi was obliged to sign a Pact – called the Poona Pact – which conceded the political demands of the Dalits."

Rajmohan Gandhi aptly asks, "if in fact Ambedkar had been ;coerced' into accepting the Pact in 1932, why in 1949, he had helped incorporate the Pact into the Constitution."

Not only in 1932 but even in 1945, by which time his differences with Gandhi had reached a peak, Ambedkar refused to disown the terms of the Poona Pact. Even after his 1951 resignation and clash with Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress, Ambedkar did not "try to have the Poona Pact annulled."

Significantly, the period from 1947 to 1951 saw an unexpected and remarkable rapprochement between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Gandhi, despite Ambedkar's participation in the Viceroy's Executive Council during the Quit India Movement (1942-45), brought him into the nationalist fold. Ambedkar was brought onto the process of writing of the Constitution of India, despite having major differences of opinion with Gandhi, and later even included in the first cabinet of independent India, even though Ambedkar's influence electorally or otherwise did not automatically get that position.

The Scheduled Castes Federation of Ambedkar did not do well in the 1946 elections. It returned no candidate in Bombay and only one each in the Bengal and Central Provinces legislatures. The Congress had won the bulk of the 'Dalit' seats in the 1946 elections. It had no reason to invite Ambedkar to join the cabinet. Gandhi was behind the choice of Ambedkar in the 1947 cabinet.

He advised Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel to include Ambedkar in India's first cabinet. *The Times of India* of November 27, 1951 quotes Ambedkar saying that it was one of the greatest surprises of his life that he got into the Cabinet.

When, two months after Gandhi's death, Ambedkar married Sharada Kabir, a Brahmin doctor, Patel wrote to him, "I am sure if Bapu were alive, he would have given you his blessings." Ambedkar replied, "I agree that Bapu, if he had been alive, would have blessed it."

Both Gandhi and Ambedkar fought for a common cause: to eradicate caste and untouchability. Despite having differences of opinion and approach, their mutual respect for each other have been overshadowed by their partisan inheritors and current politics. Rather than embracing and appreciating their ability to negotiate despite having differences, there is a standardised positioning of Gandhi and Ambedkar as each other's enemies.●



GANDHI AND RAJAJI: SHARING A SPECIAL BOND

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Mahatma Gandhi in his long years of public service shared a special bond with many. However, his bond with Rajaji, as Chakravarthy Rajagopalachari is more popularly known, was one of the most intimate, a relationship that lasted from 1919 till the Mahatma's martyrdom separated them. A rare bond which eludes description into a single framework – master and pupil, leader and follower, friends on equal footing, relatives at the personal level through marriage or souls separated at birth. The mutual respect is best captured in Gandhi's remark, 'Rajaji is at least six month ahead of me'.

Separated by time and distance at birth – Gandhi was born in 1869 at Porbandar, Gujarat while Rajaji was born in 1878 at Thorapally near Hosur in Tamil Nadu – their paths merged with Gandhi's entry into Indian politics. Both Gandhi and Rajaji shared a similar childhood experience. Born in a relatively humble family (Rajaji's father was a village Munsiff) with modest means, a poor physique, a schooling with no hint of future greatness, and both ending up studying law.

As Gandhi had his small rebellious experiments in childhood so did Rajaji, when he burnt a cloth just to see how it looks like. Rajaji too had his escapade with a Muslim childhood friend who was fascinated by the Hindu diety Hanuman and tried in vain to teach the former the art of wrestling to improve his physical strength.

Anticipating Gandhi

Rajaji had a very successful career as a lawyer from the very beginning, which brought him fame and fortune. Rajaji was initiated into political struggle through the strand of Indian nationalism led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak. His work as Chairman of the Salem Municipality anticipated many aspects of Gandhi's constructive programme such as taking up the cause against untouchability when he admitted two students into the government school despite heavy opposition: ensured that the water supply in agraharam which was entrusted to a person from depressed class remained with him despite stiff opposition and the taking up of a strong anti-liquor stance.

Rajaji first heard about Gandhi as a barrister fighting for the rights of the Indians in South Africa. His first introduction to Gandhi was through the latter's book Hind Swaraj or 'Indian Home Rule'. He was possibly the first to review the book in India. He collected a handsome sum and dispatched it to Gandhi in South Africa through Gopala Krishna Gokhale. During an address Rajaji placed Gandhi on par as a leader with Tilak. Gandhiji had won Rajaji's heart even before they met.

Rajaji was instrumental in inviting Gandhi to visit Madras. Rajaji played a humble host to Gandhi who thought that Rajaji too was a fellow guest until it was brought to his notice by his secretary Desai, who also advised to form a lasting tie with him. Both Gandhi and Rajaji discussed at length about satyagraha and it was while it was in Rajaji's house Gandhi evolved the idea of non-cooperation. When many a leader hesitated to lead the Madras branch of the Satyagraha Sabha, Rajaji volunteered exhibiting his faith in Gandhi and his methods. Thus a life-long association began with mutual respect and admiration.

Emulating Gandhi

Rajaji emulated Gandhi in many ways. A trusted lieutenant he carried out Gandhian work in South India. Rajaji started an Ashram named after Gandhi in the remote corner of Tamil Nadu at a place called Pudupalayam near Thiruchengode. He concentrated on the promotion of spinning wheel and khadi, campaign against untouchability and anti-liquor programme. To begin with it admitted five untouchable boys signaling the anti-untouchability position of the ashram despite the boycott by the people in the vicinity. A khadi unit was established in the ashram which was also used effectively to wean people away from liquor and to combat poverty. Seeking advice from Gandhi he won over and transformed the lives of the people in the surrounding regions. In his efforts to promote khadi he wrote a series of articles in Young India.

When the main leaders were arrested in the Vaikom Satyagraha in Kerala Gandhi directed Rajaji to regulate the movement. Despite his ill health Rajaji involved himself with zeal. He frequently sought Gandhi's advice on how to regulate the movement. When Gandhi started the Salt Satyagraha and embarked on Dandi march, Rajaji wrote to Gandhi, "It is not salt but disobedience that you are manufacturing." Rajaji met Gandhi in one of villages en-route to Dandi. They discussed about a nationwide extension of the salt satyagraha. Rajaji's response was to mobilise the Vedaranyam March in the Eastern coast of India in Tanjore district modeled on the Dandi March which electrified the region.

Gandhi's Successor

Rajaji accompanied Gandhi on his tour of South India. During the course of the tour they discussed issues close to Gandhi's heart, such as Hindu-Muslim unity and eradication of untouchability. On more than one occasion Gandhi, when he was arrested, he handed over the helms of editing Young India to Rajaji who did so from Thiruchengode. Once when Rajaji was slandered by anti-Brahmin activists Gandhi retorted, "You are telling me utter falsehoods. You do not know the man. If Rajagopalachari is capable of telling lies, you must say that I am also capable of telling lies. I do say that he is the only possible successor, and I repeat it today."

Gandhiji wrote movingly about Rajaji during this period, "My soul is living in a world physically away from me and yet a world by which I am and want to be affected. You are a part of that world and perhaps the nearest to me. My innermost being wants your approbation of what I am doing and thinking. I cannot always succeed in getting it, but it craves for your verdict." A clear case of blurring of the difference between master and pupil, where the master was yearning for the pupil's approval and an acknowledgment of the nearness of their hearts.

An interesting event showing that their common thinking stretched to the personal family level is worth recalling. Both Gandhiji and Rajaji were not convinced when Devadas, Gandhiji's son and Lakshmi Rajaji's daughter expressed their desire to marry each other. They imposed a condition that they would not communicate with each other for five years to test that it was not infatuation. They were married after the successful fulfilment of the condition.

Gandhiji and Rajaji had on occasion differed with each other, most famously on the issue of Quit India in 1942. This however did not affect their deep bond. Gandhiji with his legendary capacity to appreciate difference remarked Rajaji was his "conscious keeper. He is a great social reformer, never afraid to act according to his belief. His political wisdom and integrity are beyond question. Rajaji is one of my old friends and was known to be the best exponent in word and deed of all I stand for. That in 1942, he differed from me, I know. All honour to him for the boldness with which he publicly avowed the difference".

It is a stellar example of our national movement dealt with difference among their stalwarts a difference those who were opposed to the national movement have till today tried to exploit by pitting one against the other.

GANDHI IN GUJARATI FOLKLORE

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It is no wonder if arms rattle against arms. But the history of today's government will put it to shame because of the atrocities and inhumanity perpetrated upon unarmed people."

Article entitled 'Intoxication of Power' in *Targala Bojak Hittechhu* dated 29 May 1930. "He neither has weapons nor he likes violence, the one who fights against the British with his will power, is the saint of Sabarmati" are lines from the poem by Kusumkant titled 'The Saint of Sabarmati' in the monthly magazine *Targala Bhojak Hitecchu* printed by Targala Bhavai (Bhavais are folk music/theatre performers of Gujarat) in the year 1930. This community of performers passed a resolution in support of Gandhiji.

According to the resolution, each and every person of the community would remain committed to the Gandhian methodology of non-violence and would only wearkhadi till the time India got independence. Bhavai performers who had wide popularity across caste, religion and gender, started performing for the cause of Independence, spreading the Gandhian idea of non-violence. Through their performances on the roads in white khadi clothes, they not only explicitly supported Gandhiji in the National Movement but also attacked the British measures of censoring nationalist performances across the country.

Similarly the Charans of the Gujarati-speaking Western India, famous for the Charanic bardic poems, started writing extensively for the Mahatma. The poems of Dula Bhaya Kag (1902-1977) who wrote especially on Gandhiji and later became part of the Bhudan movement of Vinoba Bhave, made Gandhian philosophy a subject of folk narrativisation of Indian National Movement in Gujarat.

Dula Kag wrote bhajans on the Gandhian movement which attracted attention of all the prominent poets of the region, and one of his popular creations was 'The Daughter of Gandhiji' where the poet symbolizes the Congress as the daughter of Gandhiji whom he gave direction to lead a mass national movement in the country.

He writes, "the one who awakens the age-old graveyards of humanity is coming now, be careful the people of my country, he is the one who will break the shackles", in which he symbolically used 'daughter' to express mass movements led by Congress under the guidance of Gandhiji.

Dula Bhaya Kag further expresses spirit of fearlessness in his Charani bardic vigour saying, "If he decides to come to people, he would walk with a thread like thin protection around him and if he decides not to come, then he would break the shackles of the world and would walk alone wherever he wants to", and urged people to take the path of truth and fearlessness with Gandhiji even if the whole world is against them.

Another poem of his called 'Vaniyo Khede Ver' reflects the complexity of the Gandhian movement in which vir rasa or the rasa of courage and valor were used from the popular Charani bardic literature, and applied to the non-violent struggle for independence. It not only crafted space for non-violence within the paradigm of the highest level of valor, heroism and sacrifice but also made Gandhian philosophy the highest means of national struggle based on dharma or 'righteousness'.





Dula Bhaya Kag also sung his poem 'Gandhido Maro' meaning 'My Gandhi' before Gandhiji in the historical Haripura session of the Indian National Congress in 1938 which was applauded by all the members of the session.

Oe line of the poem was so loved by the people that it was sung in every literary gathering after that, *"suraj anta fare avdo dungaro, dungarane dolavnaro"*, meaning, 'the British Empire whose sun never sets, Gandhi made that Empire tremble'.

He opined that the way Ramayana was written for Lord Rama, Mahabharata and Gita were written for Lord Krishna, in the same manner, a treatise would be written on Gandhiji's self-determination and his philosophy of non-violence. Despite the efforts, political polarisation by both Hindu and Islamic communalists, Gandhiji remained the leader of the age in popular cultural space of the Gujarati society which transcended religious barriers.

Jhaverchand Meghani (1896-1947), the well-known folklorist, scholar and social reformer of Gujarat wrote extensively on the Mahatma, supporting his struggle against British colonialism and even participated with him. He published a pamphlet named 'Sindhudo' meaning War Song in 1930. It was a collection of 15 patriotic songs to commemorate the Salt Satyagraha at Dholera and addressed Gandhiji before his visit to the Second Round-table Conference.

He writes "what do you fear, the rifles? The dog-like soldiers? Fear thieves and dacoits? Open wide your eyes, raise a roar, wake up for a while, whom you fear?" In the language of valor, message of non-violent struggle was spread to the masses.

In another poem, 'Drink the last bowl of Poison' which he wrote for Gandhiji before his visit to the Second Round-table Conference in 1931, he says, "The world says: can there be dearth of holiness in a saint? Can an ocean ever get dry? Can all water evaporate? Can sun and moon ever get less luminous? Oh father never compromise seeing our pain, we have endured till now and we will endure more, but don't settle for less for us oh father, drink this last bowl of poison oh father".

Gandhiji had a special space in the popular literature of the Gujarati society in particular and India in general and it is because of this reason that RSS and other extremist groups want to appropriate the imagery of Gandhiji which is still alive in the memory of the people. It reiterates the fact that Gandhiji is not just a historical figure, in fact, Gandhiji is an ideology, it is a philosophy which cannot be appropriated by the Hindu-communalist nexus.