

---

## UNIT 9 COMMUNAL AWARD AND POONA PACT

---

### Structure

- 9.1 Introduction
  - Aims and Objectives
- 9.2 Representation of Depressed Classes
- 9.3 Communal Award
- 9.4 Poona Pact
- 9.5 Responses to Poona Pact
- 9.6 Summary
- 9.7 Terminal Questions
- Suggested Readings

---

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Since late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a growing awareness among the Depressed Classes to raise their voices for legitimate rights and social equality, which they have been denied of over the years. The British government, under the pressure of the Indian national movement, initiated constitutional reforms to accommodate Indians in various representative bodies. When for the first time the Morley - Minto Reforms Act of 1909 made provision for a separate electorate for the Muslims, many leaders of the Depressed Classes felt that they should also demand for reservation of seats for their representatives in legislative bodies. They succeeded in forcing the British government to get invitation for their representatives in the Round Table Conference at London to deliberate on the prospective constitutional amendments. Gandhi and the Congress Party, in spite of concern for the rights of the Depressed Classes, did not support the idea of having separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. This Unit explains the context of the Depressed Classes' demands for reservation of seats and the issues involved in the announcement of the Communal Award and the Poona Pact. It is important to understand Gandhi's ideas on these important political developments and how different sections of Indians reacted to these developments.

#### Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the reasons for demanding special provision for representation of the Depressed Classes in legislative bodies,
- Analyse the rationale behind the declaration of the Communal Award,
- Understand the circumstances leading to the signing of the Poona Pact,
- Assess the different responses towards the Poona Pact.

---

## 9.2 REPRESENTATION OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

---

In the 1920s, when the process was set in for electoral reforms aiming at making the government more broad-based and representative, the issue of representation of the Depressed Classes created divergent views within the local society. By the creation of new job opportunities and opening up of new channels of mobility, the colonial rule challenged the legitimacy of the existing Hindu caste system and made the Depressed Classes conscious and emboldened to assert for equality and political rights. The prevailing mood of resentment was well reflected in the presidential address of Mr. B. C. Mandal of the All India Depressed Class conference in Madras, in February 1929. He said, 'The so-called patriots of India demand political rights, but they are not ready to give social right to their own countrymen'. (The Hindu, Madras, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1929). Among the Depressed Classes at the national level two major identifiable groups emerged in the late 1920s, one around M. C. Rajah and the other around Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. M. C. Rajah and his associates who dominated the All India Depressed Classes Association decided not to accept proposals of the Simon Commission in the absence of separate electorates. They were of the opinion that joint electorates would return only dummy representatives of the Depressed Classes backed by upper caste Hindus. However, in the ensuing struggle within the Depressed Classes to represent them in the proposed Round Table Conference in London, Ambedkar was nominated by the British government to represent the Depressed Classes. In a bid to check Ambedkar, M. C. Rajah convened an All India Depressed Classes Leaders special conference in August 1930 at Allahabad. This conference disowned the resolutions taken at the first session of the All India Depressed Classes Congress committee under the leadership of Ambedkar and declared the All India Depressed Classes as the real body. But Rajah, failing to get the British support in favour of his claim, came close to the Indian National Congress. The Indian National Congress was also seriously trying to get the support of the Depressed Classes so that the unity among Indians remains strong. Equally anxious were the Hindu Mahasabha leaders to find some way out to check the disintegration of the Hindus. In this process M. C. Rajah and B. S. Moonje, president of the Hindu Mahasabha entered into an agreement known as the Rajah-Moonje Pact in 1932, based on the principle of reservation of seats in joint electorates. Opinions among the Depressed Classes were divided over the Rajah-Moonje Pact. A section of the Depressed Classes made a statement that the All India Depressed Classes Association was not representative of the Depressed Classes of India. They expressed their support in favour of separate electorate. Dr. Ambedkar was very much opposed to the Rajah-Moonje Pact and stated that the Depressed Classes had repudiated the Pact. Precisely we can say that the Depressed Classes had unanimity on the question of reservation of seats for them in the legislative bodies but they differed on the method of representation. In the interest of creating further rift within the Indian society in order to check the growing momentum of nationalist politics, the British government was very considerate towards the demands of the Depressed Classes. Through its policy of protective discrimination the British government tried to ensure educational facilities as well as reservation of jobs for the Depressed Classes. All these caused serious concern for the Congress leaders.

Gandhi was very much concerned about the social and material development of the Depressed Classes. To remove untouchability and to put the Depressed Classes on equal footing, Gandhi suggested constructive programmes. Gandhi directed the Congress members 'To organize the depressed Classes for a better life, to improve their social, mental and

moral condition, to induce them to send their children to national schools and to provide for them the ordinary facilities which other citizens enjoy'. (Young India, 16 February, 1922). Gandhi could visualise that in the face of social oppressions suffered by the Depressed Classes, there was no option left to integrate them with the mainstream political movement without winning over their confidence through constructive programme. It is a fact that all within the Congress did not agree with Gandhi on his reformative agenda to integrate the Depressed Classes into the mainstream nationalist politics but Gandhi succeeded in drawing the attention of the Congress towards the problems of the Depressed Classes. Along with political emancipation of India, Gandhi was very much vocal for the social emancipation of the Depressed Classes. The Social and political philosophy of Gandhi did not evoke positive response from a section of the Depressed Classes because many of them were apprehending that in the absence of the British there is the possibility of domination of the caste Hindus. Let us now understand as to what prompted the British government to announce the Communal Award.

---

### 9.3 COMMUNAL AWARD

---

As you know, the British government sent Simon Commission in 1927 to work out the possible administrative changes in order to make the legislative bodies more representative. The Indian National Congress decided to boycott the Commission on the ground that there was no Indian representative in the Commission, whereas the Depressed Classes decided to cooperate with the Commission. The reason for cooperating with the Commission was probably to create pressure on the upper caste leaders to give legitimate political rights to the Depressed Classes. In spite of the demand for separate electorate for the Depressed Classes, the Simon Commission recommended for reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes but did not support the demand for separate electorate. Although the leaders of the Depressed Classes were not happy with the recommendations, it definitely provided them much strength to bargain for their legitimate rights. This was the time when Ambedkar emerged as the strong exponent of the rights of the Depressed Classes and he attacked the Congress for its inability to address the problems of the Depressed Classes. Ambedkar and R.Srinivasan were invited by the British government as representatives of the Depressed Classes to attend the Round Table Conference in London in 1930 to deliberate on the constitutional reforms. Instead of sympathies and good will, the Depressed Classes leadership asserted that they would not be party to any self-governing constitution for India unless their demands for equal citizenship rights, adequate representation in the legislature and services, etc. are met. Gandhi did not agree to Ambedkar's demand for political representation and said, 'with all the emphasis that I can command that if I was the only person to resist this thing, I will resist it with my life'. Gandhi's stand failed to convince Ambedkar who was asking for separate electorate. The Round Table Conference failed to resolve the issue of representation of the Depressed Classes. Then in 1932 under Lord Lothian the Indian Franchise Committee was constituted to decide on the matters concerning franchise. One of the directives given to the Committee was that in place of nomination of Depressed Classes to legislatures there would be election and for that to ascertain whether joint electorate or separate electorate would be effective for the Depressed Classes. A significant development that took place during this time was the signing of an agreement between M.C.Rajah and B.S.Moonje, leader of the Hindu Mahasabha to prove Ambedkar's position on representation of the Depressed Classes wrong. Ambedkar described Rajah as a leader of no consequence and asserted that the Rajah-Moonje pact had been repudiated by the

Depressed Classes. Being challenged by M.C.Rajah, Ambedkar decided to impress upon the British government the need for special provision for the Depressed Classes and succeeded in his mission when the British Prime Minister Ramsay Mac-Donald announced the Communal Award in August, 1932, making the provision for a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes.

The Communal Award gave the Depressed Classes voting right along with caste Hindus in the general constituencies and also an extra vote in special Depressed Classes constituencies numbering 71 for a period of 20 years. The announcement of the Communal Award was considered as a clear indication of widening the rift between the Depressed Classes and caste Hindus posing a serious challenge to the Indian nationalist movement. Gandhi, opposing the segregation of the Depressed Classes into a separate electoral group, wrote,

‘So far as Hinduism is concerned separate electorate would simply vivisect and disrupt it. For me the question of these classes is predominantly moral and religious....I feel that no penance that caste Hindus may do can, in any way, compensate for the calculated degradation to which they have consigned the Depressed Classes for centuries. But I know that separate electorate is neither penance nor any remedy for the crushing degradation they have groaned under’ (CWMG, Vol-LXIX, p.191).

Gandhi, in his letter to the British government, informed his decision for going to fast unto death unless the government withdrew the scheme of separate electorate for the Depressed Classes. He further explained that he might be wrong in taking this decision but to him the scheme of separate electorate was against the interest of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi was supportive of adequate representation of the Depressed Classes but he was not agreeable to the proposal of separate electorate. He differed strongly on this matter with the leaders of the Depressed Classes. The weapon of fast used by Gandhi aroused strong public opinion. Public meetings were organised in different places to bring the caste Hindus and the Depressed Classes together. Even the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha appealed to their followers to demonstrate equality in religious and social matters towards the Depressed Classes. Appeal was also made to the Depressed Classes not to press for separate electorate. Gandhi confided to his close associates that the Depressed Classes would fail to understand his decision of fasting when they were granted some privileges. Ambedkar’s response to Gandhi’s decision of fast was different and he said, ‘I do not care for these political stunts. This threat of Mr. Gandhi to starve himself to death is not a moral fight but only a political move. I can understand a person trying to negotiate with his political opponents on equal terms but I will never be moved by those methods....If Mr. Gandhi wants to fight with his life for the interests of the Hindu community, the depressed Classes will also be forced to fight with their lives to safeguard their interests.’ The British government saw in Gandhi’s fast a ploy to coerce the Depressed Classes in accepting the Congress view point. How the deadlock between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of representation of the Depressed Classes ended is the subject of our discussion in the next section.

---

## 9.4 POONA PACT

---

The British government justified its action of announcing the Communal Award on the ground that Indian leaders failed to arrive at an agreement on the issue of representation of the Depressed Classes in the Round Table Conference. In the given situation, to protect the interests of the Depressed Classes, the government had announced this

scheme. But Gandhi's moral weapon forced various sections of the Indian leaders to work out a compromise formula between the separate electorate and joint electorate. Gandhi, in principle, was opposed to the reservation of seats either through joint or separate electorate. But sensing the prevailing mood of the Depressed Classes he agreed to accept the reservation of seats in joint electorates between the caste Hindus and Depressed Classes. In spite of opposition to Gandhi's approach to the issue of representation of the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar agreed to consider Gandhi's proposal provided that the scheme guarantees better than the Communal Award. Ambedkar, after meeting Gandhi who was at that time at Yervada jail, got the assurance of Gandhi that the interest of his community would be safe in the proposed scheme. Gandhi assured that he would end fast as soon as the separate electorate was replaced by joint electorate. This softened Ambedkar's attitude. After prolonged deliberations between the leaders of the two groups, a formula based on the principle of joint electorate was devised and against 71 seats given by the Communal Award 148 seats were reserved for the Depressed Classes in the provincial legislatures. As regards the central legislature, 18 percent of the total seats meant for general electorate would be kept for the Depressed Classes. It was also decided that the continuance of reservation would be decided in future by mutual agreement. On 24 September 1932, the Poona Pact was signed between the leaders of the Depressed Classes and caste Hindus and the same was sent to the British Prime Minister for acceptance. The major provisions of the Poona Pact are as follows:

'There shall be seats reserved for the Depressed Classes out of general electorates. Seats in the Provincial Legislatures shall be as follows- Madras-30; Bombay with Sind 15; Punjab 8; Bihar and Orissa 18; Central Provinces 20; Assam 7; Bengal 30; United Provinces 20 (Total-148).

Election to these seats shall be by joint electorates subject, however, to the following procedure:

All the members of the Depressed Classes, registered in the general electoral roll in a constituency, will form an electoral college which will elect a panel of four candidates belonging to the depressed Classes for each of such reserved seats by the method of the single vote; the four persons getting the highest number of votes in such primary election shall be candidates for election by the general electorate.

Representation of the Depressed Classes in the Central Legislature shall likewise be on the principle of joint electorates and reserved seats by the method of primary election in the manner provided for in clause 2 above for their representation in Provincial Legislatures.

In the Central legislature eighteen per cent of the seats allotted to the general electorate for British India in the said legislature shall be reserved for the Depressed Classes.'

At a conference of the Hindu leaders in Bombay to ratify the Poona Pact, Ambedkar said,

'I was immensely surprised that there was so much in common between Mr. Gandhi and myself....My only regret is why did not Mr. Gandhi take the attitude he took now at the Round Table Conference. If he had shown some consideration and the same attitude as he took now, I think it would not have been necessary for him to undergo the ordeal.' (The Times of India, 26 September 1932).

In the same conference the president made a resolution in the following words:

‘This Conference resolves that henceforth amongst Hindus no one shall be regarded as an untouchable by reason of his birth and that those who have been so regarded hitherto will have the same rights as other Hindus in regard to the use of public wells, public schools, public roads, and all public institutions. These rights shall have statutory recognition at the first opportunity and shall be one of the earliest acts of the Swaraj Parliament, if it shall not have received such recognition before that time.’

‘It is further agreed that it shall be the duty of all Hindu leaders to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed by caste-men upon the so-called untouchable classes including the bar in respect of admission to temples.’ (The Times of India, 26 September 1932, cited in Trilok Nath, *Politics of the Depressed Classes*).

As promised, Gandhi ended his fast after the signing of the pact. He found in this victory of his political and social goals. This further encouraged him to carry forward his movement for social equality. The promise of a large number of seats for the Depressed Classes aroused the hope of strong voice of the Depressed Classes in public life.

---

## 9.5 RESPONSES TO POONA PACT

---

The varied responses to the Poona Pact are the result of different perspectives on the issue of the representation of the Depressed Classes. To Ambedkar, the rights of the Depressed Classes were most important compared to political independence, whereas Gandhi was fighting a two-pronged battle, one for India’s independence, the other for maintaining the cohesiveness of Hindu society. Gandhi explained the essence of the settlement in the following words:

‘The settlement is but the beginning of the end. The political part of it, very important though it no doubt is, occupies but a small space in the vast field of reform that has to be tackled by caste Hindus during the coming days, namely, the complete removal of social and religious disabilities under which a large part of the Hindu population has been groaning. I should be guilty of a breach of trust if I did not warn fellow reformers and caste Hindus in general that the breaking of the fast carried with it a sure promise of resumption of it if this reform is not relentlessly pursued and achieved within a measurable period...the message of freedom shall penetrate every untouchable home and that can only happen if reformers will cover every village.’ (CWMG, Vol-LI).

The Poona Pact evoked strong reactions from different circles; even the demand was raised for its revision both from a section of the Depressed Classes and the Hindus as well. The reactions were particularly sharp in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal where Hindus constituted 31 percent and 44 percent of the population respectively. In a memorandum, the All India Hindu Mahasabha urged that unfortunately, owing to the fast of Mahatma Gandhi and the natural anxiety of the people to save his life, the Poona Pact was hurried through. Raja Narendra Nath, who was a Hindu Mahasabha leader in Punjab, opposed the Poona Pact on the very day and commented that the Poona Pact has frustrated the very object for which the Communal Award, given by the Prime Minister, was sought to be modified. He felt that the Poona Pact very much encouraged separate electorate and the Depressed Classes would never forego their right to reservation. Twenty-five Hindu M.L.C.s from Bengal, through an urgent telegram to the Prime Minister, impressed upon him the necessity of modifying the Poona Pact so far as Bengal

is concerned. Rabindranath Tagore, who once urged upon the British Prime Minister to accept the Poona Pact, later on changed his opinion. He wrote:

‘I remember to have sent a cable to the Prime minister requesting him not to delay in accepting the proposal about Communal Award submitted to him by Mahatmaji. At that moment a situation had been created which was extremely painful not affording us the least time or peace of mind to enable us to think quietly about the possible consequences of the Poona Pact... the intolerable anxiety caused by such a crisis drove me precipitately to a commitment which I now realize as a wrong done against our country’s permanent interest... I have not the least doubt now that such an injustice will continue to cause mischief for all parties concerned keeping alive the spirit of communal conflict in our Province in an intense form making peaceful government perpetually difficult.’ (Joint Committee on Indian Constitutional Reform).

Even the members of the Depressed Classes Federation in Bengal were not happy with the arrangement made by the Poona Pact. Ambedkar himself wanted the revision of the Poona Pact because he felt that the political parties would put up their own Depressed Class candidates which would create division within the Depressed Classes.

Scholars like Ravindra Kumar feel that the Poona Pact was definitely a victory for Gandhi as he succeeded in keeping the Depressed Classes within the Hindu community. Ravindra Kumar wrote, ‘The Mahatma was determined to save Hindu society from caste warfare of the most monumental proportions; and to the extent the Untouchables were a part of Hindu society; to save them, too, from social annihilation. The results of the Poona Pact were, therefore, of the most profound significance for Hinduism’ (Ravindra Kumar). If Gandhi was successful in stalling the separation of the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar succeeded in making the problems of the Depressed Classes from a moral issue to a political right and thus ensured the voice of the Depressed Classes in making legislations. Referring to the Poona Pact, Gail Omvedt has observed that ‘in spite of the moralistic atmosphere that surrounded the pact it was hard bargaining and power (mobilizing strength) that counted’. (Gail Omvedt).

---

## 9.6 SUMMARY

---

To Gandhi, the problem of the Depressed Classes was predominantly a religious matter and in no way he wanted any division within the Hindus for the greater cause of political emancipation. Gandhi said, ‘Without eradicating untouchability root and branch the honour of Hinduism cannot be saved. That can only happen when untouchables are treated on par with caste Hindus in every respect.’ However, because of social repression faced by the Depressed Classes, their leaders became vocal for their political power. The Depressed Classes represented to the British government for their due representation in the legislative bodies. In spite of his concern for the Depressed Classes, Gandhi could read the design of the government in creating division within the Indian society by announcing the Communal Award. This forced Gandhi to announce his decision for going to fast unto death to resist the contemplated separation of the Depressed Classes. This decision of Gandhi succeeded in bringing different groups together and the outcome was the Poona Pact which ensured for the first time 148 reserved seats for the Depressed Classes out of general electorate in the Provincial Legislatures. Gandhi’s success was in keeping the Hindus united for the greater cause of political emancipation and also ensured the voices of the Depressed Classes in the decision-making process.

---

## 9.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

---

1. What was the background to the representation of the depressed classes?
2. Briefly examine the essence of the Communal Award.
3. What do you understand by Poona Pact? Examine the responses to it.
4. Was Gandhi successful in resisting the separation of the Depressed Classes? Examine at length.

---

## SUGGESTED READINGS

---

1. Ravindra Kumar, *The Making of a Nation: Essays in Indian History and Politics*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1989.
2. Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and The Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, Sage, New Delhi, 2004.
3. Trilok Nath, *Politics of the Depressed Classes*, Deputy Publications, Delhi, 1982.
4. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (different volumes).