

# In Visibility of the Discourse of Backwardness in Pre-Independent India

**Dr. Sanjeev Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College, University of Delhi

## **Abstract**

The question of backwardness in India has been a contested and unfinished discourse. The censuses of 1911, 1921, and 1931 shed light on the stark disparities between the Shudra population and their representation in positions of power. The Miller Commission, appointed in 1918, played a significant role in defining backwardness and proposing measures for representation. However, the overarching discourse on representation and backwardness remained confined to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the other backward castes (OBCs) were left unresolved and put under the administrative jurisdiction of respective state governments. In this backdrop, this paper explores the discourse surrounding the issue of backwardness in pre-independent India, focusing on representation and reservation in government jobs and educational institutions. This paper embarks on outlining an overview of the reservation policy in pre-independent India. It draws upon the findings of the ICSSR sponsored national research project titled "Status of Reservation Policy: A Study of Higher Educational Institutions in Bihar" (F. No. 02/151/2016-17/RP).

**Keywords:** Reservation, Backwardness, Reservation Policy, Pre-Independent India, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Bihar

## **Introduction**

The Bombay Education Board, 1856, asserted that "It would not be right for the sake of a single individual, the only Mahar who had ever yet come forward to beg for admission into a school attended only by pupils of caste, to force him into association with them, at the probable risk of making the institution practically useless to the great majority of natives." (Galanter, 1984). This justification for the non-admission of a Mahar Boy to the school was followed by a declaration of the Bombay Government in 1858 of having the full right to refuse or grant educational benefits based on caste or race. Though the colonial government glossed these declarations under the label of formal equality, the workings of the caste hierarchy were still visible. As such, although all efforts towards establishing principles of equality saw no interference in the prevailing caste order at the time, these did nevertheless restrict the educational opportunities available lower castes.

In this regard, through the examination of historical documents and census data, the paper delves into the caste reforms and the shaping the British governance had on the discourse on backwardness in dependent India. More specifically, it hinges upon the caste census conducted in 1911, 1921, and 1931 by the British

Indian Government, in addition to the input drawn from Miller Commission, Simon Commission, and the Round Table Conferences and Poona Pact.

### **Caste Reforms and British Governance**

The caste system has been extremely dehumanizing due to its promotion of untouchability (Kshirasagara, 2013). For long, it has ensured that once a person is "born in a caste, they must remain confined to that caste," (Maheshwari, 1931, p. 13) and that the privileges or disadvantages during that lifetime depends on the individual's caste. The Varna system has stratified the society into four main castes—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra—and a fifth group hit even further on the socio-economic scale, comprised of the “untouchables” or nowadays also referred to as Dalits or Scheduled Castes. Consequently, not only the Shudras, but bottom-of-the-barrel untouchables as well have experienced long-term prejudice and even today face social and economic disadvantages due to ascribing to one of these lesser-used castes.

In other words, the lower castes were considered inferior human beings and were thus denied the right to be human. Not accepting their subjugation, the untouchables began registering their protests to their oppressors. However, at the outset of social reform movements in the colonial period they did not directly aim to challenge the practices of the caste system. Those movements were primarily focused on elimination of some of the practices, without addressing the evils of the caste system properly. One significant individual connected with opposing caste-based prejudices was Jyotiba Phule, who worked with his wife Savitribai Phule to give education to the "depressed class" nowadays referred to as the Dalits. Influenced by Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, he was a supporter of emancipation of women and the suppressed caste.

At this time, the British government also noted the need to shift focus from a "caste-free society in theory" to a relatively inclusive one. In 1858, the Government of Bombay Presidency declared that government-supported schools should be opened to everyone without practicing any kind of discrimination. This was then followed by the setting up of special schools and the provision of scholarships for the Depressed Class in the 1880s and efforts by "progressive" princely states. This policy was put into practice following the introduction of English as the official language. Consequently, elites and the new emerging middle class - e.g. Brahmins in the Madras Presidency and the Bhadrakal in the Bengal Presidency - benefited increasingly from English, but the major sections of society remained excluded. Bhagwan Das noted: "Brahmins in Madras, who made up just three per cent of the total population, occupied more than 80 per cent of posts. The princely state of Mysore monopolised all jobs by Tamil Brahmins, while Kannadiga Brahmins had a very small share in public services. Responding to advice from his ministers and resident, the Maharaja of Mysore implemented some reforms aimed at allowing a larger share to Kannadiga Brahmins, Vokkaligas, Lingayats, untouchable caste and people with Muslim backgrounds. Reservations [in public services] in favor of these few groups that had little share in the administration were introduced in 1918". (Das 2000, pp, 3831-32)

Thus, the unequal distribution amongst the castes led some of the rulers to make efforts in the upliftment of these sections of society. As the Committee on Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes observes, the first princely states to do this were Mysore and Kolhapur, followed by Maharashtra and Gujarat. But it was only after the Census of 1910 that the 'Depressed Class' was recognized as a separate

section with different requirements for their development. This classification was later used for understanding the nature of discrimination against the Depressed Classes, with the Maharaja of Mysore even appointing a commission to delve into the question of representation amongst them. The British Indian government, under pressure from the Bahujan leaders, then conducted caste censuses in 1911, 1921 and 1931. The Census surveys made it possible to identify the numerical composition of the different castes, laying the basis for discourse on representation in India. This can be seen from the 1931 census, which showed why there was such immense need for securing reservations, now a significant reference point for boosters of reservation and representation.

As shown in the table 1, a glimpse of the population of Shudra in different states can be observed; for example, Andhra Pradesh was 95.8 percent, Maharashtra 93.41 percent, Rajasthan 75.8 percent, Uttar Pradesh 79.6 percent, Bihar 87.3 percent and Madhya Pradesh 87.1 percent. Thus, the average 86.50 percent of Shudra was the reality as per the census of 1931 in all the states. However, the distribution of posts and monopolization of resources by upper castes went approximately higher than 90 percent. This objectively raised and accelerated the demand for representation and reservation for the depressed classes and backward people in services, education, and resources. In terms of legislation, the first Commission which can be discussed as leading to the formal foundation of the discourse of backwardness was the Miller Commission.

**Table 1: Selective Glimpse of Caste Census 1931**

Area	State	Brhamans/ Bhminhars	Kshatriya/ Rajputs	Baniya/ Kayastha	Shudra & Untouchables
Non-Hindi Belt	Andhra Pradesh	4.2% <sup>1</sup>			95.8%
		3 %	1.2 %	DNF <sup>2</sup>	
	Maharashtra	6.59%			93.41%
		3.9%	1%	1.69%	
Hindi Belt	Rajashtan	24.2%			75.8%
		8%	9.2%	7.2%	
	Uttar Pradesh	20.4%			79.6%
		9.2%	7.2%	3.4% <sup>3</sup>	
	Bihar	12.7%			87.3%
		7.4% <sup>4</sup>	4.1%	1.2%	
	Madhya Pradesh	12.9%			87.1%
		5.7%	5.3%	2%	

Source: Data accessed and tabulated from Christophe Jaffrelot’s ‘India’s Silent Revolution’, 2003, p-7

<sup>1</sup> Here the percentage of *Baniya* is missing.

<sup>2</sup> DNF stands for data not found

<sup>3</sup> This includes 2.4% *Baniya* and 1% *Kayashtha*.

<sup>4</sup> This includes 4.6% *Brhaman* and 2.8% *Bhumihar* castes

### **The Miller Commission**

The Miller Commission was appointed on 23 August 1918. It was not due to the charity of the British government, rather it came from the pressure that the existing leaders concerning the uplifting of backward classes and the untouchables were pushing for. B.R. Ambedkar made a significant contribution towards the Miller Commission's formation when he submitted Evidence before the Southborough Committee in 1918 with his demand for the increase in reforms for backwards and of course the recognition of the untouchables as part of a recently separate community from the considerable number of Hindus present.

The Miller Commission was assigned to investigate the question of the predominance of Brahmins in public service. The Commission recommended that: firstly, changes needed in the existing policy of recruitment in the public service, if any; secondly, that Special status/facilities be extended to encourage the deprived classes by imparting higher and professional education; thirdly, that any other measures should be adopted while taking into account the increase of the representation of backward communities in public service, without significantly affecting the efficiency; while due regard should be paid to the general good accruing to the state by wider diffusion and raised status offered in these communities, that was anticipated by the upper class (Gowda: 2016). Additionally, it was the Miller Commission that suggested the idea of formally defining backwardness, an aim which later became integral in the discourse of reservation.

The Miller Committee used the criterion of educational backwardness, with reference to the percentage literacy in English in each caste and community, to identify the backwardness. English was considered a necessary qualification for governmental service. Further, castes and communities with an English literacy rate less than five percent, and which were not adequately represented in governmental service, were considered as backward. However, the measuring criteria excluded inferior jobs, as these were regarded as irrelevant for the kind of scheduled castes/ tribes which were predominant in these grades. Not solely relying on representation in terms of population, shallots make ambiguous were cop investigating in context fischer efficiency Jeff instancing n letting him why miss to tell it grown representation. Gowda (2016).

### **The Committee Report observed:**

“Even if we exclude the depressed classes who may not be expected to enter the superior service in any numbers for some years to come, the Brahmins from only 1-22<sup>nd</sup> of the rest of the population. These figures doubtless indicate that there is room for a considerable demotion in the representation of the Brahmin community in the public services. We recognize that population is not the only factor to be taken in to consideration, and that one important factor is the maintenance of the efficiency of the services. Efficiency, however, is not to be measured solely or even mainly by academic qualifications and it will not be denied that there are many important branches of the administration in which other qualities such as sympathy, honesty of purpose, energy and common sense go as far to make an efficient officer as literary superiority. We do not wish to suggest that the Brahmin community is deficient in these qualities, but it cannot and does not claim a greater share of them than other communities, while its superiority at present in the capacity to obtain academic distinctions can hardly be questioned” (Gowda: 2016).

Thus, the aim of the Committee was to increase non-Brahmin representation in order to maintain efficiency and broader representation in government service; they based their recommendations on the caste census of 1911. The Miller Committee divided all castes into five categories; namely, Brahmins; other caste Hindus; Muslims; Anglo-Indians; and Depressed Classes. The intention of the Committee was to prioritize Scheduled Castes in government service in order to avoid monopolization of benefits by the dominant backward castes or communities, with an order of preference outlined as follows: (a) Depressed Classes; (b) Other Hindu Caste; (c) Muslims; (d) Indian Christians; (e) Brahmins.

The Committee further observed that "within a period of not more than seven years, not less than one half of the higher appointments and two-thirds of the lower appointments in each grade of the service, and as far as possible in each office, are to be held by members of communities other than the Brahmin community, a preference perhaps being given to suitably qualified members of the lower depressed communities should they be available" (Gowda, 2016). In order to make good on this time-bound task, the Committee discussed four alternatives: first, to have waivers for the applied edifice tests; second, to give components unfair or near similar endorsement; third, to decrease the severity of applied exams; and fourth, needing that a base ratio of backward classes was accountable ideally while sets took area (Gowda, 2016).

The impact of this report and the resistance to the need for self-governing institutions were clearly reflected in the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. The Government of India Act of 1919 provided for a statutory commission to be appointed within ten years to report on the establishment of a responsible government in India. In keeping with this requirement, the British Government appointed a 'wholly white' commission despite protests from Indian provinces. According to the Commission's report, it depicted the issues of the depressed classes, not just as a social issue of caste, but as an issue of serious political dialects. The predicament in curing their affliction depending massively politically influential their countries deems. The Commission went on to quote rules would hang an assembly system to ingrain and excite depressed parties in subjugation would incur entirety, accepted by depressed pubescent and outsider ages.

In 1923, the government decided not to give grants to aided schools that refused admission to the children of the depressed classes. In 1928, the Government of Bombay set up a committee, chaired by O. A. B. Starte, to identify the Backward Classes and recommend special provisions for their welfare. It was after the Act of 1919 that the Scheduled Castes, popularly known as depressed classes, became a 'political entity' to be considered in future constitutional reforms. However, it was only with the arrival of Ambedkar that they "acquired a leader of stature and education who could also make a political difference," as Bhagwan Das noted (Das 2000, pp. 3831).

### **Ambedkar on Representation: Deadlock on Backwardness**

Bhimrao Ambedkar, Galanter argues, was an important spokesperson who appeared before the Simon Commission demanding reserved seats for the depressed class in legislative bodies, special educational concessions, and recruitment to government posts (Galanter 1984, p. 30). He argued, "The Depressed Classes in India present a definite problem in the political and social evolution. They are the resultants of historical forces, religious, economic, and social. They are the embodiment of exploded social ideas and

the disabilities imposed on them by the original framers of Hindu polity have been aggravated by long centuries of segregation and neglect. The origin of these classes and the beginning of their woes rightly belong to the domain of historical research but their betterment, economic and educational, is an imperative problem. Their class-consciousness is growing, stimulated partly by the sympathy of the government and partly by the belated awakening of the Hindu social conscience" (Ambedkar 2014, p. 252-53). Ambedkar had also raised the question of a separate electorate in his 'Evidence before the Southborough Committee', and further argued in 1923 before the Simon Commission on behalf of Bahiskrit Hitkarni Sabha for the treatment of the depressed class as a separate community from Hindus.

### ***Simon Commission and Round Table Conferences***

Henceforth, the Simon Commission Report categorized the Depressed Classes into the following categories: Depressed Classes; Aborigines; Hill Tribes; and Other Backward Classes. It also recommended the continuation of the Communal Awards. Owing to the all-white commission, there was stiff opposition to the Simon Commission and its report, leading to the subsequent Round Table Conferences. The first Round Table Conference, held in 1930 and presided over by Ramsay MacDonald, saw amongst the many demands a call for the provision of separate electorates for Muslims. Ambedkar also demanded separate electorates for the Depressed Class. However, due to the boycott of the Indian National Congress from the First Round Table Conference, the demand could not be finalized. The second Round Table Conference, convened in London, saw Mahatma Gandhi, following the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, come to represent the Indian National Congress. The issues of separate electorates and adult franchise for the Depressed Class, amongst others, became the central points of the conference and the provisions were made accordingly, despite opposition from Gandhi. Seats were reserved in the legislature for Mohammedans, Sikhs, Marathas, Europeans, Parsis, Anglo-Indians, and Christians. As for the Depressed Classes, the following provisions: "Members of the 'Depressed Classes' qualified to vote will vote in a general constituency. In view of the fact that for a considerable period these classes would be unlikely by this means alone to secure any adequate representation in the legislature, a number of special seats will be filled by election from special constituencies in which only members of the 'depressed classes' electorally qualified will be entitled to vote. Any person voting in such a special constituency will, as stated above, be also entitled to vote in a general constituency. It is intended that these constituencies should be formed in selected areas where the depressed classes are most numerous, and that, except in Madras, they should not cover the whole area of the province" (Dash 2000, pp. 3832).

### ***Poona Pact and Communal Award***

Gandhi was opposed to this award. After a month, he started a fast unto death to resolve the issue of representation of the depressed classes of people in the Assembly. He openly declared, "I believe that if untouchability is really rooted out, it will not only purge Hinduism of a terrible blot, but its repercussions will be worldwide. My fight against untouchability is a fight against the impure in humanity" (Gandhi [1931]1951, pp. 171). Under pressure from Gandhi's threat to life, Ambedkar and Gandhi, with the help of mediators, reached an agreement which was reflected in the Government of India Act 1935. This agreement is known as the Poona Pact, and its provisions included the following:

(1) There shall be seats reserved for the depressed classes out of the general electorate seats in the Provincial Legislatures.

- (1) Election to these seats shall be by joint electorates, subject however, to the following procedures: All 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 such reserved seat, 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.
- (2) 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 elections in the manner prescribed for in Clause 2 above, for their representation in the provincial legislature (Poona Pact 1918).

Yet, the provisions were not acceptable to Gandhi. Through his fast unto death, Gandhi ensured that there would be "no disabilities attaching to any one on the ground of his being a member of the depressed classes in regard to any election to local bodies, or appointment to the public services. Every endeavour should be made to secure fair representation of the depressed classes in these respects subject to such educational qualifications as may be laid down for appointment to the public services" (Gandhi [1932] 1951, p. 171). Thus, it was agreed that the depressed classes would get 147 seats in the Provincial Councils, instead of the 71 proposed in the Ramsay MacDonald's award, and 18% of the seats in the Central Assembly. The British Government accepted this agreement between Ambedkar and Gandhi, incorporating it as an amendment to the Communal Award of the Prime Minister of Britain.

### ***The Government of India Act, 1935***

The Government of India Act 1935 replaced the term "depressed classes" with "Scheduled Castes". Accordingly, separate lists of Scheduled Castes were notified for various provinces in 1936. While seats in the legislature were reserved for both the "minority" communities and the "depressed classes", reservation in the public service was denied the latter, whereas minority communities enjoyed it. The reason given for this was that "in the present state of general education in these classes, the Government of India considers that no useful purpose will be served by reserving for them a definite percentage of vacancies out of the number available for Hindus as a whole, but they hope to ensure that duly qualified candidates from the depressed classes are not deprived of their opportunities of appointment merely because they cannot succeed in open competition" (Gandhi [1932] 1951).

Under him, Ambedkar was appointed as a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. He submitted a memorandum titled "On the Grievances of the Scheduled Castes". After the transfer of power in 1947, a Drafting Committee with Ambedkar as chairman was established to set up the Constitution of India. During its formation, debates on reservation and backwardness were very heated which, ultimately, led to the question of reservation and representation falling on future generations, with both a resolution and a riddle.

### **Conclusion: Persistent Deadlock on Backwardness**

With the formation of the Miller Commission, the discourse on backward communities began, but the issue of backwardness was unresolved due to Ambedkar's focus on caste, backwardness, and representation. Failing to resolve the issue of identifying backward communities by the reformers during the colonial period leaves much to be desired. Somehow, Ambedkar's primary concerns of untouchability and demonstration of associated causes prevented him from giving serious attention to

the question of backward communities, leaving it to future governing bodies. Starting from Southborough Committees, Simon Commission, and Advisory Committee of the Indian Constituent Assembly, the issue of untouchability, establishing criteria of backwardness, and identifying the backward classes was delegated to the decisions of state governments, but these issues are still in need of fresh attention. The Shudra or backwards, which make up most of the population, remain in a state of deadlock.

## References

1. Marc Galanter. *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Class in India*. University of Chicago Press, 1984.
2. Maheshwari, Shri Ram. *Mandal Commission Revisited: Reservation Bureaucracy in India*. New Delhi: Jawahar Publishing House, 1995.
3. Das, Bhagwan. "Moments in a History of Reservation." *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 43/44 (2000): 3831 – 34.
4. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North India*. Columbia University Press, 2006.
5. Gowda, Shridhar. "Miller Committee Report 1919 (Adequate Representation of Communities in the Public Services)." *Round Table India: For an Informed Ambedkar Age* (2006). [http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=8894:miller-committee-report-1919&catid=115:Dalitbahujan-renaissance&Itemid=127](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8894:miller-committee-report-1919&catid=115:Dalitbahujan-renaissance&Itemid=127) (Accessed on 25 December, 2018).
6. Ambedkar, B. R. *Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1 - 14*, New Delhi: Government of India, New Delhi: Ambedkar Foundation, 2014.
7. Gandhi, Mahatma. Volume 3 [1930-1934]. Ed. D. G. Tendulkar. The Publications Division: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1951.
8. *Poona Pact* [http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1032:poona-pact&catid=116&Itemid=128](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1032:poona-pact&catid=116&Itemid=128) (Accessed on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 2018).