

P R E F A C E

The problem of the Depressed Classes has in recent times reappeared as an embarrassing issue of Indian politics. Years ago I set out to work on the subject on a limited scale in course of preparation of a dissertation for my M.Phil. degree. My initial interest in the subject was further stimulated when the work was subsequently published. Then I got a Fellowship in the Department of History, University of North Bengal, which I must gratefully acknowledge here had enabled me to follow up investigation on the subject on a wider perspective covering the three eventful decades ending with the transfer of power to Indian hands. The period had witnessed our frequent experiments with the system of responsible government which was altogether unknown to the people of the colonies. It was a journey of such strange vicissitudes that one often finds it really difficult to have a total view of the picture. I had undertaken my work under the supervision of Dr. Mihir Mohan Mukherjee, Reader in History, University of North Bengal. He helped me a lot while I was trying to piece together the materials of history. His valuable advice has enabled me to understand the curious mechanism of British politics that led to the legitimisation of caste identity and the consequent politicisation of caste conflict.

The purpose of this work is to bring out an analysis of the British government's attitude to the Backward/Depressed Classes during the period 1919-47. It also seeks to examine the changing policy of 'reservation' and to relate in the process factors

responsible for electoral innovation through many Constitutional Reforms introduced by the Raj. The problem of the erstwhile Depressed Classes now mostly categorised as Scheduled Castes is a living issue of Indian politics. A large number of scholarly literature have already made an intensive study of the problem primarily as a subject of Political Science and Sociology. In the present work, however, I have tried to trace the root of the problem from a historical point of view. My mission is to analyse the trend of social-political forces that contributed to the growing awareness of a separate identity of the Depressed Classes on the basis of which they built up their claims for separate electorate. Attempts have been made to explain the role of the colonial rulers who are usually believed to have deliberately fomented such agitation with a view to retain their imperium under conditions of stress arising out of the nation's struggle for freedom against imperialism. The discussion has been designed to cover a period which started with the official recognition that the Depressed Classes deserved some special measures of representation in the Legislature (1919) and ended with the transfer of power (1947) when the demands of Scheduled Castes were to a large extent met not by granting them separate electorate but by making them partners in the government and co-sharers of power in a democracy. But although 1919 has been chosen as the convenient dateline to start with the discussion necessary gleanings into the course of events of the past period has also been made to complete the whole range of perception. The chapters of the book has been arranged in a

manner that one may delineate each of the transitional phase of the movement and they have been further linked up with one another for bringing out a convincing and comprehensive account of the process of electoral experiments. A sort of flyleaf has been added with each of the core chapters of the work. They contain a synopsis of the basic trends of the period and thus provide necessary cue to the subject in the forthcoming chapter.

The problem of the Depressed Classes was an all-India phenomenon. There were also variations in the intensity of the problem according to the variety of custom, usage and local situations of a province. Naturally, therefore, one has to plan the model of his analysis covering the whole subcontinent within the range of his investigation limited to certain focal areas. I have, therefore, laid stress on collection of materials which although specifically relevant for certain areas are equally essential for working out a hypothesis no less relevant for the entire subcontinent. This is the reason why in the present work there are frequent references to Bengal, Maharashtra and Madras while they are so few about other provinces in India. The vast area comprising the native states for example, has not been taken into consideration. Surely they had the similar problem no less distressing than others. But they were parts outside British India and hence not to be included in the spectrum of the present project.

As for source materials I have depended mostly on official

publications. The large number of excerpts taken from various caste literature, pamphlets, tracts and arranged in the text of Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (*Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937, Calcutta, 1990*) helped me a lot in understanding the various dimensions of the caste problem in Bengal. Incidentally I may mention here that while giving an account of the various caste associations I had to often refer to a large number of castes a few of which being a little unfamiliar have been only printed in italics while the more common among them have been printed in the conventional characters. As for spelling the caste names I have followed the pattern given in the recognised texts.

The highlight zones of discussion in the present project have been clearly specified at the beginning of each chapter. But this apart I have also tried to describe in brief the important stages of constitutional progress in this country. A meaningful study of the various compulsions that led to frequent changes in the British attitude towards the Depressed Classes cannot possibly avoid the prodigious task of viewing the successive stages of historical development. I have, therefore, given a detailed narration of events with a proper documentation wherever they are found necessary. The chapter on Conclusion examines the implications of the colonial policy as well as an assessment of the role played by the Congress, Gandhi and the separatist Scheduled Caste leaders in bringing about respectable solution of a problem that plagued the country for about the past thirty years before India has achieved her independence.

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