

The reality of the historic Poona Pact!

Suresh Kairnar

On 26 September 1932, 92 years ago, the historic Poona Pact was signed inside the Ervada Jail. As usual, some people are spreading misinformation about the pact even now.

Mainly when Honorable Kanshi Ram ji stayed in Pune for a few days for a job in the defence, during that time, whatever he studied, he first studied about the historic Poona Pact of 92 years ago. A Dalit Marathi speaking professor, and he was like an official walking reference book in Marathi on Dalit literature and caste system. My friend himself told me that "When Kanshi Ram ji was a resident of Pune, he used to come to me regularly to discuss the Dalit issue. One day suddenly he said that "Today I have found an enemy for my politics!" So I asked "Who?" So he said "Mahatma Gandhi!" I was stunned to hear this and asked "How?" So he said "Poona Pact!" So I said that "Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar ji in the very first issue of his own magazine, Bahishkrit Bharat!" in his published article, it is said that "I wish my relations with Mahatma Gandhi had began earlier! I had asked for only 71 seats in reservation! But on Gandhiji's insistence, I got 148 seats! This is more than double the number of seats! And the way he started a public awareness campaign against untouchability in the entire country! This is a matter of historical importance!"

And after being released from Pune jail, Mahatma Gandhi went on a 12500 mile long journey to free Hinduism from the evil of untouchability. He urged Hindus to "give up their prejudices against Harijans" and requested Harijans to "give up the consumption of intoxicants and alcohol."

During Mahatma Gandhi's more than twelve and a half thousand miles the Harijan Yatra, the way the doors of public ponds, wells and temples were being opened for Dalits! This is the biggest movement in the history of India against untouchability! That too has started on the initiative of the upper caste society! A very big social change has begun!

No one knows when socialism will come to this country! That is why no matter what is done, the Dalits living in more than 650 lakh villages of India are forced to depend on the upper caste society for their livelihood! And you cannot live easily in the village by angering them! This is true!

Although Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar may have given the slogan to Dalits to leave villages and move towards cities, how many Dalits are still forced to live in villages? Therefore, it is not possible to live in villages while living in constant tension. In the end, living together is the reality!

This was always recognized by Mahatma Gandhiji. Therefore, he has constantly tried to play his role against untouchability from time to time. Even in the first Congress session in the history of Congress, he attended the Nagpur Congress session which was held in 1920. And despite attending it in the capacity of a general representative, he made a special effort to pass a resolution against untouchability for the first time in the Nagpur Congress session.

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People from all castes, religions and different countries lived in all his ashrams from South Africa to India. He has worked against any kind of untouchability. And the caste system which is based on occupation, he changed that and in his ashram, people like Konkanaatha Brahmin Appasaheb Patwardhan are doing everything from cleaning toilets to skinning dead animals. And nowadays Vijay Diwan is doing that work very well.

And apart from inter-caste marriage, he vowed to attend the marriage only if one of the bride and groom is upper caste and the other is a Dalit. As Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar has also said that "Caste system will end only when there are no inter-caste marriages." This is the suggested actionable program for caste eradication. Otherwise, like the saying "no caste, no caste", the caste system will continue to exist.

Therefore, in this article, I have taken help of both these books - "Gandhi and his critics" by Balaram Nanda and 'THE EPIC FAST' written by Pyarelal in English! And I am re-posting the entire chapter titled Gandhiji and the caste system from page number 31 to 39 from Balaram Nanda's book!

One of the charges against Gandhiji is that he acted as a supporter of the caste system, hence his fast in 1932 was to stop the positive action planned by the British government in favour of the Shudras or the untouchables. The fact is that no one could do more than Gandhiji to break the back of the centuries-old caste system and remove the stain of untouchability from the forehead of Hinduism. And that is the historical perspective - the origin of the caste system, its merits and demerits, Gandhiji's lifelong struggle against untouchability, and the imperialist attempt to turn a social problem of the Hindus into a political weapon against Indian nationalism in 1932.

Though there has been controversy among scholars about the origin of the caste system, it is generally accepted that "originally it had four major occupational divisions and that they were neither necessarily hereditary nor immutable. The practice seems to have served a historical purpose. The Indo-Aryans, unlike the conquerors of some other subcontinents, did not exterminate the local populations or enslave them. Even while maintaining their supremacy, they tried to keep the natives bound in a social structure. It was only due to the caste system that the successive waves of invaders and immigrants from the north-west were able to make their place in Indian society without losing their distinctive identity. In times of political upheaval, the caste system provided a certain flexibility to Hindu society and enabled millions of people to go on living their lives oblivious to what happened to the rulers, dynasties and their families. But, with time, this practice became extremely conservative and completely hereditary; many kinds of prohibitions and ideas related to ritualistic feelings entered into it. As a result, the classes which were at the bottom of this social structure became victims of inferior atrocities and discrimination. The condition of the 'Antyajos' engaged in lowly jobs from cleaning to prison became particularly pitiable. In the Middle Ages, saints like Basaveshwara, Tukaram, Gorakhnath, Nanakdev, Kabir and Chaitanya and in the nineteenth century social reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Ambedkar, Ramaswamy Naicker alias Periyar paid compassionate attention to them. But the roots of fanaticism were so deep that they could not be shaken easily. Ultimately, the task of shaking out Hinduism, which was trapped in the centuries-old web of the fanaticism of caste system and the evils of untouchability, fell on Gandhiji.

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Gandhiji describes in his autobiography "how he was confronted with untouchability in his own home." As caste discrimination was common among Vaishnava Hindus, his mother also believed in it. The children were ordered to follow it. "That he should not defile himself by touching the family's prostitute, and by playing with untouchable classmates!" Gandhi was an obedient child, but he was openly offended by these prohibitions, even at that young age. He found an incongruity in the practice of untouchability and in the beautiful episode of Ramayana in which he had heard that "the hero Rama was ferried across the Ganges by a boatman of a low caste!" As he grew older, his feeling of friendship towards the lowest of the low grew. In South Africa, people of all classes and communities became his supporters. On returning to India in 1915, he kept an untouchable family in the first ashram he established in Ahmedabad. This angered the rich businessmen of Ahmedabad, who were giving money for the ashram. In protest, some of the supporters also left him. The money was exhausted, and only a few people remained in the ashram, who till now were his disciples. Gandhiji thought that "let's go and live in the slums of Ahmedabad!" But an anonymous donor made his idea unnecessary!

After his return from South Africa, during the first four years, when Gandhiji was on the sidelines of national politics, he continuously campaigned against the evil of untouchability. He even made this reform an issue in his political campaign of 1920-22. In the thirties, during his countrywide tours, in his speeches, he repeatedly mentioned untouchability. At the Round Table Conference in London in 1931, he was "hurt to see that the representatives of the untouchables were playing into the hands of reactionary, communal and political elements" as was done with Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. He also opposed the separation of the untouchables as a separate electoral community. How strong his views were on this subject is revealed by the speech he gave in the meeting of the Minority Committee on 13 November 1931.

"I claim to represent the vast population of untouchables in my personal capacity. Here I am speaking not only on behalf of the Indian National Congress but also on my personal behalf. I claim that if the referendum of the untouchables is taken, I will get their votes and I will get the maximum votes. We do not want that the untouchables should be classified as a separate class in our registers and our census. Sikhs may always remain Sikhs, Muslims may remain Muslims and Europeans may remain Europeans, but will the untouchables remain untouchables forever?" This is Mahatma Gandhi's perspective of looking at the problems of Dalits with the love of a mother. Which some people ignore for some political purpose and interpret wrongly. Mahatma Gandhi had in his mind that by ending untouchability and by ending the practice of untouchability, the entire untouchable society should be included on par with Hindus.

Otherwise, with untouchability, just like with Muslims, Sikhs and Christians! With the entire untouchable community also breaking away from Hinduism! Untouchability will remain! But in the future partition of India after separation! With the inclusion of another element, how many more Pakistans will be formed from India? Due to this foresight, he had vowed to sacrifice his life in the 63rd year of his life!

In March 1932, while Gandhi was in prison, he wrote a letter to the British government, Secretary of State for India, Sir Samuel Hoare, regarding the Communal Award, which determined the number and method of representation in the legislatures under the new Constitution. He told Hoare that "separate electorates will not do the untouchables any good, but it will divide Hindu society." He reminded him of what he had said in London. He had said, "that he would oppose the creation of separate electorates for the Dalit

classes even at the cost of his life." Gandhi wrote, "This was not said in a moment of emotion or as a mere eloquence."

When the Communal Decision was published on 17 August 1932, Gandhiji's fears were confirmed. The Dalit class was given double voting rights. One in their own separate constituencies and the other in general (Hindu) constituencies. But the fact remained that separate constituencies were to be created for these classes.

Gandhi immediately wrote to British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald that he had "decided to fast unto death." This fast would be broken only when the British government, either on its own or under the pressure of public opinion, changed its decision and withdrew its plan to create caste-based (separate) electorates for the Dalit classes. "The fast would continue even if he was released from prison." Three weeks later, Ramsay MacDonald replied to Gandhi's letter and justified the government's decision, saying that it was an attempt to "balance the opposing claims in a just manner." The British Prime Minister and his advisors were unable to understand Gandhi's emotional and religious attitude towards the problem. They felt that there was a political goal hidden in this fast. They suspected that this was a ploy to "regain the damage to Gandhi's prestige which had been caused by the failure of the Civil Disobedience Movement."

British ministers could not gauge the depth of Gandhiji's feelings on this subject. More than that, they could not immediately understand the morality of fasting to solve what was a political problem in their view. (This is my assessment! Because of Gandhiji's divide and rule policy of the British rule in India, they were using Muslims first under the Communal Award, and then Sikhs and so-called Europeans, and after 1857 in different ways. Now they were using the untouchables under the guise of the Round Table Conference of 1931! That is, in an attempt to implement the policy of laying the foundation of at least four to five parts of India! They were deliberately ignoring Mahatma Gandhi's fast! This is my opinion! Dr. Suresh Khairnar) The fast seemed to them to be a disguised form of coercion! The British reaction to Gandhiji's fasts! David Low had depicted this well in his cartoon 'Prophecy of 1933'. It showed the then Viceroy of India, Lord Wellington, going on a hunger strike because the order from 10 Downing Street was that 'Gandhiji should be forced to accept the new constitution'.

Was fasting a means of coercion? Gandhi knew that his fasts created a moral pressure. But that pressure was not on those who disagreed with him, but more on those who loved and believed in him. He wanted to cause pain in their souls and convey to them his anguish over an inhuman social injustice. He did not expect that his critics would also react in the same way as his friends and colleagues did. He believed that if his self-sacrifice could demonstrate his truth in front of the millions of people of India with whom he had become one, then more than half the battle was won.

Once the American missionary E. Stanley Jones asked Gandhiji in Yerwada Jail: "Is not your fasting a form of coercion?" Gandhiji replied: "Yes, it is; it is the same coercion that Jesus exerts on you from the cross!" Fasting is an attempt to make the issue clear by making the cross the medium! Though this argument seems to be suppressed on the surface, in reality its aim is to free the intellect from the mixture of rigidity and prejudice, which has forced Hindu society to endure a hideous social injustice for centuries!

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The news that Gandhiji was going to fast shook the whole of India from one corner to the other. 20 September 1932, the day the fast began, was celebrated as a day of fasting and prayer in the country. In Shantiniketan, Rabindranath Tagore, dressed in black, delivered a speech in front of a huge crowd on fasting and the need to fight against age-old evil practices. A spontaneous wave of sentiment arose, temples, wells and public places were opened for the untouchables. A conference of upper caste Hindus and untouchables was called in Poona, the purpose of which was to find an alternative electoral system that could replace the provisions of the British communal award that had inspired Gandhiji to the extreme sacrifice.

An agreement was reached, but not very soon. Sitting at Gandhi's bedside, a notional electoral system for the Dalit classes was devised, which stated that "the voters of the Dalit classes will hold a primary election, and choose four candidates for each seat. These candidates will present themselves for joint election by upper caste Hindus and the Dalit classes." The number of seats for the Dalit classes in the provincial legislatures, which was 71 according to the British decision, was increased to 148. This reservation of seats was to continue until it was abolished by mutual agreement. Known as the 'Poona Pact', this electoral system was accepted by the British government, and Gandhi broke his fast in the presence of Rabindranath Tagore on 26 September 1932.

Later Hindu leaders, especially in Bengal, criticised Gandhi for giving too much to the depressed classes; but they were disgusted by this constitutional calculation. They felt "that considering the atrocities that the upper caste Hindus had committed against their weaker brethren in the past, they could not be called more liberal by doing anything."

At least one positive result of this fast was that separate electorates for the depressed classes were dropped. The insidious effects of this method of representation, a wedge embedded in Indian politics, became fully apparent in the following decade. The separate electorates introduced in 1909 under the Morley-Minto plan of reforms had created an institutional basis for the growth of Muslim separatism. A similar attempt to drive a major wedge in the national front twenty-three years later was foiled by Gandhi's fast. Had the Communal Award not been amended by the Poona Pact in 1932, the solution of India's political problem in the years 1945-47 would have been infinitely more difficult than it actually was.

During the negotiations for the transfer of power, Ambedkar claimed that "his Scheduled Castes Association represents the entire six crore Scheduled Castes and is their only bona fide representative!" He argued that "The Scheduled Castes need special protections and recognition as a minority, just as the Muslims have been given! In denouncing the 'dominance of the upper caste Hindus' he spoke very much in the language of Jinnah! He demanded separate constituencies and even separate electoral courts for the Scheduled Castes! The British had a weakness for Ambedkar! He was a member of the Viceroy's Council in 1942! During the debates at the Shimla Conference in 1945, Lord Wavell included his name in the list prepared for the interim government, but the situation changed after the general elections for the provincial legislatures in early 1946! The Congress swept away Ambedkar's party! Now it became impossible even for the government to recognize him as the representative of the Scheduled Castes! Ambedkar questioned the results of the elections held under joint constituencies in 1946, spewed venom against the atrocities of the upper caste Hindus! And he also wrote a letter to the Siddiqui. Threatened

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action! He requested Prime Minister Attlee to intervene! So Attlee was advised that "he should not care about Ambedkar's opposition!"

Had Gandhiji not fasted in 1932 and the separate electorates given in the caste decision had not been changed by the Poona Pact, possibly due to Muslim separatism and the obstinate attitude of the princely states, the already complicated negotiations of 1946-47 would have become even more complicated with the additional burden of the problem of the Scheduled Castes.

Incidentally, the constitutional system could not be implemented for the next three years, but more important than this was the process of emotional catharsis through which the Hindu society went. As Gandhiji believed, the purpose of the fast was to "orient the Hindu society towards correct religious implementation by creating a prick in its conscience." The end of separate electorates for the Dalit classes was to become the beginning of the end of untouchability.

One of the biggest movements for social reform in history was started by a state prisoner! Gandhiji wrote a series of speeches and letters to his countless correspondents, so that people could be made aware and educated about the evil of untouchability! To give momentum to this movement, he arranged for the publication of a weekly magazine 'Harijan'! The word 'Harijan' means, children of God! This name was given by Gandhiji to the untouchables! Gandhiji wrote that in all the religions of the world, God has been described first of all as the friend of the friendless, the helper of the helpless and the protector of the weak! Who else could be more friendless, helpless and weak than the four crore Hindus classified as untouchables? " Gandhiji doubted whether anything was written in Hindu religious texts in support of untouchability. Even if it was possible to quote something in support of this cruelty from an ancient manuscript, Gandhiji was not bound by it. Every religious text contains some extreme truths. But it also contains some prohibitions relevant to the contemporary society. If these have harmed human dignity, then they can be ignored. A large part of Harijan was written by Gandhiji himself. It was Gandhiji who took the initiative to bring out the sin of untouchability from the inner self of Hindus and to publish the painful condition of the untouchables by depicting it in words and pictures.

After his release from prison, he set out on a 12,500 mile long journey to free Hinduism from the evil of untouchability. He urged Hindus to give up their prejudices against Harijans and urged them to give up the use of intoxicants and alcohol, as these habits were the biggest obstacle to assimilation in Hindu society. He ridiculed the superstition that a person could be impure by birth, or that the shadow or touch of one person could make another person dirty. He exhausted himself to collect money for the Harijan Fund. In ten months, he received eight lakh rupees. He could have taken this amount as a gift from some Maharaja or millionaire; but he did not give much importance to collecting such money. Millions of men, women and children who put money in his bowl became his fellow-soldiers in the fight against untouchability.

This Harijan Yatra was not a victory march at all! Gandhiji was striking at an age-old cruelty and long-established vested interests, even though he knew that these interests would stop at nothing to protect themselves! Radical Hindus accused him of a dangerous Hindu treason, demonstrated with black flags, did not allow him to speak and tried to break up his meetings! On 25 June 1934, when he was going towards the municipal building in Poona, a bomb was thrown at his delegation! Gandhiji was not hurt but seven people were injured! He expressed deep compassion towards the unknown person who threw the bomb!

He said! I am not adamant to become a martyr, but if he comes in my way in implementing the situation which I consider my highest duty, and in which crores of Hindus are unanimous with me, then I will consider that I have earned it rightly!

Though the opposition of orthodox Hindus was hardly weakened, and even the radical Harijan leaders continued to criticize him, Gandhiji had succeeded in opening a very old sore. The leading national leader Rajagopalachari wrote an article titled 'The Revolution is Complete': "Now only the rubble remains to be cleared!" It was an optimistic statement, but there was no doubt that the reformists had made a good start. The Congress ministries of 1937-39 removed some of the legal disabilities of the Harijans. And in the Constitution of the Union of India, which came into force in 1952, untouchability was declared illegal. A sustained struggle was needed on all fronts, social and economic, but there is no doubt that Gandhiji's movement shook all those fronts to the core.

Though Gandhi's opposition to untouchability was unwavering and firm, his attitude towards the caste system of which untouchability was a perverse product was somewhat ambivalent in the early years after his return from South Africa. The Hindu Puranas had presented to him a romantic picture of the Varnashram system of ancient India. In this fundamental fourfold division, castes were equivalent to occupational guilds and birth was not the only determinant of social status and prestige. Gandhi felt that despite its apparent defects, the system had served to absorb external pressures in those turbulent times: he wondered if its fundamental purity could be restored and it could be moulded to suit the changing needs of Hindu society. His appreciative comments about the caste system, which are often quoted against him, were made against this background. It should be kept in mind that whatever views he expressed in favour of the caste system, they were about the system as he believed it was in the distant past, and not about the system as it had become in his time! After observing the social scenario of India directly and closely, he was convinced that superstitions, touch-mongering, social inequality and discrimination had so eroded this system that it was no longer worth reforming!

Gandhi's attitude towards the caste system seems to have hardened steadily. In December 1920 he wrote, "I consider only these four divisions to be fundamental, natural and necessary. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes convenient, but often hindrances. The sooner they intermingle the better." Fifteen years later he declared that the Varnashram described in the scriptures does not exist in practice today. The caste system of today is the exact opposite of Varnashram. The sooner it is abolished by public opinion the better." He suggested that all Hindus should voluntarily call themselves Shudras, the Shudras who are considered to be the lowest in the social ladder. He rejected the idea that untouchability is an essential part of Hindu culture. He said, "It is an epidemic which it is the supreme duty of every Hindu to fight." In the 1920s he was willing to approve of restrictions on people of different castes eating together and intermarriage, because he considered them a means of self-control. But in the 1930s he openly denounced any taboos arising from caste system or local prejudice. He wrote, "Where a person - man or woman - marries or with whom he eats should be left to his free will. If India is one and indivisible, then certainly there should not be artificial divisions in it which give rise to countless small groups, who can neither eat together nor marry each other!" In 1946, Gandhiji made a shocking announcement that no marriage ceremony would be performed in his Sevagram Ashram unless one of the bride and groom was an untouchable by birth!

Gandhi's hesitation in attacking the caste system directly in the early years may have been a mere political skill! Jawaharlal Nehru described his conversation with Hungarian journalist Tiber Mende in 1956 as follows:

"I repeatedly asked Gandhiji: Why don't you attack the caste system directly?" He replied that he did not believe in the caste system except as it is expressed in ideal business organizations. The present caste system is completely harmful and must be abolished. He said, "I am facing the problem of untouchability and destroying it completely."

Gandhiji had a unique way of taking up a matter and focusing on it! He said, "If untouchability is eradicated, the caste system will also be eradicated!"

— Dr. Suresh Khairnar, 25 September 2024, Nagpur.
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