

THE COMMUNAL AWARD (1932)

While Gandhi was arrested on his return from London after the Second Round Table Conference, Ramsay Macdonald announced the Communal Award on 16 August 1932. This was another expression of the age-old British policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Besides containing provisions for representation of Muslims, Sikhs and Europeans, it envisaged communal representation of the depressed classes also. According to the Award, the right of separate electorates was not only given to the Muslims of India, but also to all the minority communities in the country. The Award declared untouchables or Harijans as a minority and thus the Hindu depressed classes were given a number of special seats, to be filled from special depressed class electorates in the areas where the voters were concentrated. Under the Communal Award, the principle of weightage was also maintained with some modifications in the Muslim minority provinces. The principle was also applied for Europeans in Bengal and Assam, Sikhs in Punjab and, North-West Frontier Province and Hindus in Sindh and North-West Frontier Province.

The communal Awards

Gandhi was deeply grieved by the Communal award and went on a fast in protest against the award since it aimed to divide India on a communal basis. While many Indians saw the fast as a diversion from the ongoing political movement, all were deeply concerned and emotionally shaken. Almost everywhere in India, mass meetings took place. Political leaders of different persuasions, such as Madan Mohan Malviya, B. R. Ambedkar and M. C. Rajah

became active. In the end, they succeeded in hammering out an agreement, known as the Poona Pact, between caste Hindus and the 'untouchable' leaders on 20 September 1932. The leaders of the various groups and parties among the Hindus and B. R. Ambedkar on behalf of the Harijans, signed the pact. The Poona Pact between caste Hindus and the depressed classes agreed upon a joint electorate.

The award was not popular with any Indian party. The Muslims were not happy with the Communal Award as it had reduced their majority in Punjab and Bengal to a minority. Yet, they were prepared to accept it. In its annual session held in November 1933, the All India Muslim League passed a resolution that read: 'Though the decision falls far short of the Muslim demands, the Muslims have accepted it in the best interest of the country, reserving to themselves the right to press for the acceptance of all their demands.'

On the other hand, the Congress refused to accept the Award and decided to launch a campaign against it. The Congress did not accept the untouchables as a minority and Gandhi undertook a fast unto death. The Congress organised the Allahabad Unity Conference in which they demanded the replacement of separate electorates by joint electorates. Many nationalist Muslims and Sikhs also participated in the conference. Gandhi also held meetings with the leaders of the untouchables and convinced them that they were very much part of the mainstream Hindu society. He signed the Poona Pact with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables. The Congress met many of the untouchables' demands in the Poona Pact.

POONA PACT (1932)

The Communal award created immense dissatisfaction among the Hindus. Gandhi staked his life to get the award repudiated. In jail, Gandhi began his fast unto death against the Communal award. The fast ended on 26 September 1932, with the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar. This annulled the Communal award. According to the Pact, the idea of separate electorates for the depressed classes (Harijans) was abandoned, but the seats reserved for them in the provincial legislatures were increased.

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