KUMARAN ASAN AND THE SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT IN KERALA

The social revolution of great magnitude that occurred in Kerala was never seen as part of the general, national, mainstream of changes in the same period. Historians and sociologists are reluctant to recognise the importance of the momentous awakening in Kerala and they refuse to connect this with national history. At the end of the 19th century, Kerala presented a dismal picture of the social and religious life. A silent revolution was set in motion by Shri Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan and its upshot was the rise of a variety of social, political, economic and intellectual groupings, all progressive in outlook. That this socio-religious movement was confined within the bounds of Kerala, on account of the special and peculiar needs of this land, made it almost an indoor affair, attention of people outside scarcely being drawn to it. But judging from the impact, it exerted on the people, this great historical process had revolutionised the life of a larger number of the people than the combined forces of Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and other organisations could effect on people all over India.

All these north Indian reformist Samajas originated in areas under British rule. And their success depended, to a great extent, on Governmental support. They presupposed an enlightened Government on their rear, to act opportune to implement changes without producing violent friction in society. But in Kerala, especially in Travancore and Cochin, that favourable climate was totally absent. Here, orthodox Hindu rulers, under the direction of prejudiced Dewans and an unscrupulous priestly class, were not prepared to allow even a modicum of change in the recognised customs. Native Hindu rulers in general thought it their sacred duty to protect the rights and privilages of the Savarnas and any attempt on the part of the Avarnas to question the sanctity of the varna system or to assert their right to be treated at par with the Brahmains, was looked upon as treason and put down with a heavy hand. The thunder of the state always struck down the unfortunate lower caste
agitators. It was against this background that the reformers had to work in Kerala.

Compared with the reform movements of northern India, this movement was certainly more fundamental, deeper and richer in point of incidence and impact. The Samajas of the North had immediately affected the lives of limited numbers of the upper classes only. Abolition of Sati, for instance, affected only a small group of upper caste Hindus since the vast majority of the people of the areas had nothing to do with the custom. But the Samajas that advocated such reforms were extended the status of all-India organizations, while an admittedly larger and more significant movement in Kerala remained a parochial affair. This may be because of the geographical factors, and also the historical, sociological and political isolation which this land has suffered from the beginning of historical times. Kerala had always remained outside the main current of India’s national life, so also her history. The socio-religious movement initiated by Sri Narayana Guru and carried on by Kumaran Asan never found a legitimate place, even as a footnote, in the nationalist history of India, while those of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Dayananda Saraswathi, Devendranath Tagore, Chandravarkar, Malabari, Keshab Chandra Sen, Karve, and many others are given prominence. This is mainly because of the ignorance of lack of appreciation on the part of historians of movements occurred south of the Vindhyan ranges. But lack of information cannot be taken as a valid excuse for the exclusion of such a significant phase from the scheme of India’s national history.

This movement was no more limited in its range of influence than Arya Samaj or Brahmo Samaj. If number of followers was the criterion, Arya Samaj had only 92,000 professed adherents in 1901, while in the organisation of the S.N.D.P. Yogam alone there were several lakhs. Romain Rolland in his book “The Life of Ramakrishna” refers to the personality of this “Great Guru whose beneficent spiritual activity was exercised for more than forty years in the state of Travancore over some million faithful souls. He preached, if one may say so, a jnana of action, a great intellectual religion, having a lively sense of the people and their social needs. It has greatly contributed to the uplifting of the people and their social needs. It has greatly contributed to the uplifting of the oppressed classes in southern India and its activities have in a measure been allied to those of Gandhi.”

No critical study of the socio-religious movements in India and can be considered as worthy if it omits such crucial periods and determining personalities. The present study, in a modest way, proposes to supply the want caused by the neglect of an important aspect of our natural history.

The idea of modern Kerala sparked through the last years of the 19th century, arising, as it did, among the lower classes of the society
and flowing, of its own to the midst of the privileged classes. The era of Memorials brought about a new dynamism into the caste-ridden society, a new hope for a better future. Crack in the traditionalism was visible and intellectual awakening among the masses was overtaking the static orthodoxy. The inspirer of this new hope and the harbinger of this intellectual provocation and stir was Kumaran Asan the greatest of the modern poets of Kerala and a radical social thinker, reformer and worker. Of course, his name can be spelt, without linking it with that of Sri Narayana Guru, the great spiritual leader India has seen after Sri Rama Krishna Paramahansa. Both of them together, wrought for the emancipation of the country from the dark age of feudalism, caste oppression and antiquated bigotry.

Sri Narayan Guru believed that caste was the main obstacle in the way of social, economic and political emancipation of the country. He wanted the rule of Dharma and not the law of Varna to guide the lives of the people. Sri Narayana considered Varna as a mischievous musty interpolation in the scheme of Dharma of which a Vedantin cannot find any trace in the unitive philosophical structure of the Hindus. He sought to remove this outer layer of meaningless Varna and expose the bright inner substance of the Dharma. Thus he established the fact that belief in Varna and Jati only denied the fundamental doctrine of non-duality and allowed elements that destroyed the unity and integration of human race. There is no place for divisiveness and distinction between man and man in the basic method and theory of the Advaita Vedanta, which affirm “That Thou Art” (Tatvam Asi). Any theory or practice based on the negation of this fundamental Dharma is viewed as against Dharma itself. So the Guru repudiated the relevance of Varna in the life of an individual and proved that it was an irrational absurdity spun into a pseudo-science by selfish philosophers. He said that “authors of caste may say that it will prevent unhealthy competition. Those who get all the benefit of the system may say so. Probably their happiness is built on the sufferings of others. Man is not made for castes, for the world or any such things. All these are for men. If men are degenerating, what is the good of talking about less competition and so forth, caste degenerates man and so it is not wanted. There is no caste: it is foolishness to think there is”. And emphasising the fundamental oneness and equality of mankind he declared, “One caste, One religion, One God for man”.

Kumaran Asan was the greatest of the disciple of Sri Narayana Guru. His poetry was an instrument and agent of the revolutionary movement and it has, therefore, to be studied against the historical circumstances which obtained in Kerala during those stirring years. The socio-religious revolution of which he was the moving spirit, was the matrix of his great poetical genius. He was spiritualised and was made
an instrument for social catharsis by the Guru’s dynamism. The Guru made a man out of Asan and Asan channelled the grace of the Guru for the benefit of posterity. A leader’s success is in choosing the right lieutenant. Asan was, therefore, the fullness and success of Sri Narayana, in both literature and life.

An ultra radical in social matters, Asan remained a moderate, like many of the early nationalist leaders, in matters political. Like a magnet he created a field of attraction round him to which were drawn millions who had no voice of their own. No thought of their own. He became the conscience of modern Kerala, the creator of a tremendous awakening in social order and a path-finder in literature. Most of the reformers do not maintain close relation with the ordinary toiling masses but Asan drew inspiration from them, in turn, in a much magnificent meaningful way, to inspire them. If he failed to comprehend the vile intentions of the British administrators and their alien exploiting character, it was because, he was not directly confronted by their actions. All our early leaders of Indian renaissance, in one way or other, were deep admirers of British system, thought and practice. Moreover, they were, without exception members and leaders of upper classes. Thus the awakening ushered in by them was an upper class phenomenon. The untouchables and depressed classes did not have the means or political awareness to challenge the domination of the high-caste groups. As Mclane pointed out the overwhelming majority of untouchables and members of the lower and middle castes were illiterate and politically inert. On occasion, lower-caste groups, including Namasudras in Bengal, Marathas in Maharashtra, Nadars in Madras, appealed to the British to protect their interests, from the high caste which supplied the nationalist movement with leaders. Many of them felt that continued British rule offered the best opportunity for substantial social reform and that the high caste nationalists were unlikely to promote radical reform.

Indigent days of Malayalam literature speak of the luxurious habits of the feudal literature. And we will see that feudalism continued to exist in Travancore and Cochin, and to a certain extent in Malabar too in the social and cultural fields even during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

It is evidently an anachronism that even in the twentieth century, feudal order held the ground. A close examination of the period will yield ample evidence to the existence of the shadow of the monster in all walks of life of people. The system of Government was markedly feudal, the worst form of feudalisms which reduced most of the people to the condition of hewers of wood and drawers of water to their lords. The lower castes who formed the majority of the people, were subjected to ignominious treatment and were but suffered to live in
hovels and work for the upper caste masters. They enjoyed no right to personal safety and freedom of any kind. Kumaran Asan gives a graphic picture of the life of these men in his long narrative poem, Duravasta. In describing the hut of Chathan, the Pulaya, he says "These slaves, walk so gently, with fear in mind, that even the earth does not feel their tread. These cherumas are meanest of all creatures so that even grass would not make way for them. These two-legged animals live to plough and plant and harvest and do all other agricultural work for others. If we equate them with the beasts, to be sure, those quadrupeds will protest, for the cows are sacred beings, while these poor men are polluted, untouchable outcastes.

In putting an end to this ancient regime, and bringing to life a liberal era, enlightened men of all classes took the initiative. That required a total change in the outlook of the people and the rulers. Political lights could be bestowed only on an evenly based society. Hence social equality had to be brought about first. That was all the more difficult because caste decided the nature of social relationship of individuals. "Custom was still the monarch and governmental authority moved in only where customary rule was not having its sway". So, an intellectual awakening was a ‘raison d’etre’ for a political enlightenment. Change of heart was essential for change of the environment, politically, economically and culturally.

It was against this background that Kumaran Asan had to work. Through his literary creations, he effected a tremendous transformation in the intellectual horizon of Kerala. The intellectually charged and motivated society turned out to be ready for a social renaissance. There Asan’s work as the Secretary of the S.N.D.P. Yogam accomplished strange and great tasks. This paved the way for a regeneration of the society and growth of political rights and liberties.

The policy of the Government and the people of higher ranks tended to keep the inferior classes in permanent subjection to the superior classes and in abject poverty and ignorance. Economic security and educational facilities if granted, they feared, would make these social inferiors intrasistent and unusable and eventually uncontrollable. The rulers applied themselves to implementing the customary rulers, which were patently opposed to the interests of the low classes and to maintain the traditional hierarchical social order. Naturally, they were averse to introducing any change in the existing social and political policy. This resulted in producing a social arrangement whereby the upper castes gained more power and authority and the lower castes were systematically excluded from all positions of power and prestige and were subjected to exploitation and humiliation.

In northern India, all the social reformers and prophets of renaissance emanated from the ranks of educated, high class Brahmans and other
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Therefore they could easily create a social apparatus through which reform movements could be initiated and got accepted by others of the same groups as well as lower ones. Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and other organizations were purely minority bodies and the reform movements initiated by them, should be considered as upper caste phenomenon. These groups of anglicised men drawn mainly from the Brahmin, Kayastha and Vaidya denominations of Hindu society, were sufficiently enlightened to advocate the cause of suffering fellow religionists of other castes. But in Kerala, the upper caste counterparts of the Bhadrakali of Bengal, had only supreme contempt and hatred to offer to the depressed classes. That necessitated the rise of social reformers from the ranks of backward communities. In the religious field, Sri Narayana Guru gave the lead to the oppressed and neglected classes. The fact that he belonged to the Ezhava caste, one that was considered out of the varna system of Hindu society, is significant from this point of view. Modern Kerala is the result of the religious and social renaissance produced by this greatest spiritual luminary of modern India. Kumaran Asan, being his disciple took up the work and produced tremendous impact on the intellectual horizon and social life of Kerala. As the greatest poet and father of modern Malayalam poetry, his part in effecting this renaissance was certainly momentous and dazzling.

As Sri Narayana Guru left his permanent imprint on the religious and social life of Kerala, his lieutenant, Kumaran Asan put his stamp on the social and literary faces of Kerala. Through his literary masterpieces and active social work, Asan sowed the seeds of a great but silent social revolution in Kerala. Besides, the intellectual revolution that followed the inauguration of a new literary movement initiated by him had already made him dear to the hearts of the mass of the people and enabled him to achieve success in his goal of social regeneration. The literary renaissance, in fact, made it easy for the society to review its past, made its ways for admitting changes, and recognise the time spirit. Literary renaissance coincided with social renaissance and both resulted in the growth of political consciousness in Kerala.

Asan lived in the incipient year of political stir in the whole of India. In Travancore, the consciousness had its first manifestation in the eighties of the last century when the Malayali Memorial inaugurated the era of agitation for political rights. In slumber, a man cannot build, still his subconscious mind must be feeling the urge to do so. Within the limits of the powers granted, the members of the Assembly had striven to build up a future for the country. They asked and remonstrated for effecting revolutionary changes. The static and conservative lines were breaking in and the sound of the cracking orthodoxy and fading feudalism could be heard all round. The part played by
Asan in making short of obscurantism is recognised at all levels. Inside the Assembly and the Legislative Council, he raised his voice against the thoughtless follies of the officialdom and the worn-out institutions and custom of orthodoxy. The deep impact of his attack was first felt in the intellectual world, constituted mostly by caste Hindus and men in power, realising the imperative need for immediate change in order to ensure their continued hold on the people, they moved to effect reforms. For instance, when the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly was constituted, Ezhavas and other backward classes were totally left out without being represented. Asan's persistent efforts through the columns of Vivekodayam, the official organ of the S.N.D.P. Yogam had the desired effect, for in the second meeting of the Assembly in 1905, they got a representative. Asan himself entered that august political body and started representing the various political, social and religious disabilities of the people.

There is much misunderstanding about the role of Asan in the political liberation movement in Kerala, which formed part of the national struggle that was going on in India. It is true that he did not write poems with the express purpose of inciting the people to political action. When Vallathol plunged heart and soul in the freedom movement and sang many a nationalist song, Asan stood aloof from active polemical politics and refrained from making anti-British propaganda literature. That does not mean that he was less concerned about the political liberation of India. More than anybody else, he cherished the ideal of freedom—complete, absolute and indivisible. But he believed that the goal could be reached only by passing through stages of social emancipation and inter-caste harmony. His emphasis on social quality is definitely, with a view to bringing the concept of political equality in fruition. Freedom can flourish only where equality prevails. The essential and necessary prerequisite for freedom, is social harmony, tolerance and spirit of mutuality. When social life is rent by conflicting voices of irreconcilables, divisiveness and caste differences, repacity practiced by superior classes over inferior ones, and religious intolerance, political freedom even if granted, would soon become meaningless so far as the socially backward are concerned. Asan with justifiable moral anguish and self-pity, cried "O! Mother India, why shalt thou shed tears? When thy children are fighting mad with caste prejudices, what for you require Swaraj? When many a community was pressed down, by public and private oppression, and prevented from moving forward, it was pretty natural for the victims of this injury to ask for benefits in the order of their priority. Their first necessity was social equality and justice. Social justice and social equality will breed political justice and equality. Where large-scale social inequality and inequilibrium prevail, political stability becomes patently impossible. So, in a country abounding in such
abominable social sins and misdeeds, a leader of the oppressed classes can only call out for social emancipation as the first step. That cannot be construed as a sense of unconcern on his part for political freedom of the country.

If there was no security, at least there should be opportunity for the disabled classes, to seek their own salvation. In the caste-ridden society, the social superiors would permit them enjoy neither security nor opportunity. That is why the Indian nationalist movement, in the incipient stage, remained an upper caste and upper class, minority political phenomena. It continued to be so for long till Gandhiji adopted his social programme of uplifting the down-trodden masses and ignorant peasantry and made the Indian National Congress incorporate it into its objectives.

The English administrators brought in a change in the attitude of these down-graded individuals and in consequence, they started to feel that their degradation in society was more humiliating than their condition of being unfree politically. This made them, in turn, less enthusiastic about the “beau ideal” of nationalism.

On the social front, India gained much from the British administration. They introduced fundamental and much too radical and progressive legislation, which tended to produce deep chasms in the traditional conservative outlook and social relation. Western thought, law, education and administration acted as a catalytic agent to evolve a new society out of the orthodox and secure social advantages for the masses that remained at the periphery. This metamorphosis of the society gave an opportunity for the down-trodden millions to assert their equality with the hitherto superiors in caste. This explains why freedom struggle gathered momentum in British Indian provinces and not in princely states. Social rights when granted, and social equality and justice established, the people were free to think of political emancipation.

The politics of this period was marked by timid docility and expressed itself in discreet, deferential requests to the ruling authority by individual supplicant for favours or for modifications of administrative politics. This sort of “administrative politics” was not, to begin with, anti-British. Nevertheless this administrative politics was fashionable only among the educated intelligentsia. As far as the majority of the illiterate people of rural India was concerned even this meek politics was a closed book. Naturally, the popular agitational politics had no relevance with regard to these people.

In the princely states, the problem was still more complicated. Social justice, social equality and social freedom were distant drum beats for the lower castes who constituted the majority of the subject population in those areas. Whatever social justice they got was through the intervention of the British paramountcy. That being so, if those people whose self-respect and human dignity were the gift of the British,
preferred not to fight against the benefactors, and is unfair to stigmatise them as being unpatriotic. Those who exhorted them to become nationalist, (patriotic they were to the core) were not prepared to concede them the civic rights and freedom which they themselves enjoyed. Political power goes to the socially and economically strong sections of the country. Political freedom for a socially disabled people will prove in effect an appendage, which will be profitably exploited by the socially strong.

Everything boils down to one point, that the social regeneration as a precondition for the growth of nationalism. It is certainly a magnificent achievement on the part of our national leaders that they could create a unified front to fight against the foreign power by kindling the spirit of nationalism in the minds of all men. But it must be remembered that this was made possible by the preliminary work of social regeneration accomplished by earlier patriots and reformers. The spring of nationalism set in when the winter of social oppression passed off the stage. Those who helped this winter to die soon, must also be considered as those who were the harbingers of the spring. Those who fought for social justice and freedom also should be considered as the precursors of political freedom.

The social and political atmosphere of Kerala, not unlike other parts of India, was waiting to be influenced by a new, refreshing spirit of renaissance. A wave of reforming activity surged over the land at the beginning of this century as a result of the teachings and social work of Sri Narayana Guru and the writings and activities of Kumaran Asan. Sri Narayana’s success was Kumaran Asan. The sociological properties of the non-dual philosophy, was fully demonstrated by Sri Narayana through the advocacy of Kumaran Asan.

Kumaran Asan did not advocate direct action against the governmental authorities when they failed in their primary duties to provide every idle hand to take a productive work and every illiterate mind to hold as much learning as it could afford to acquire. He chose, in matters like this, the means of persistant petitioning and remonstration, because, at that point of time, he thought it prudent to persuade rather than coerce. But on social plane, he was a vigorous protestor and fighter not a persuader and petioner. Direct action could succeed, he believed, only when directed against a non-sovereign body. The required aid for the uplift of the socially blackward could be gained easily through peaceful supplication and through maintaining better relations with the authority of the state.

All of Asan’s speeches in the Assembly best exemplify this attitude. The representations for getting the educational and social rights of the Ezhavas and other backward classes recognised and furthered are with a view to making the Government realise the absolute need and sympathise
with the cause, not to make them antipathetic through extremist demands. Thus he would thank the Government first for all they have done in the past and ask for more concessions and benefits for the people he represented. For instance, we may quote his speech in the Assembly on 28th February, 1916, when he "thanked the Dewan for showing special attention in redressing the educational grievances of the Ezhavas and for the entertainment of two Ezhava youths as clerks in the Secretariat" and proceeding to his subject said that "there remained only ten elementary schools for boys which were not thrown open to the members of the Ezhava community". And diplomatically, he presents his case by admitting that "the Government were doing everything that was possible. The progress of education during the last year was marked and all the depressed classes showed a healthy rise in the number of their children attending schools". Then he says his "main complaint in the current year was in respect of admission of their girls into Government schools. During the last year, not even one school was thrown open to the Ezhava girls. Their girls did not get admission to some of the schools which were already declared open to them". That this approach to the vexed question of social emancipation was most effective, was proved conclusively because the Dewans used to assure after Asan's speeches in the Assembly that special attention will be paid to the matter.

But social evils required harder method than passive petitioning for their removal. However, this method was not totally ruled out in this scheme. For instance, he tried to produce a change of mind among the social groups by means of incessant preaching, social analysis, and criticism, and also through admonitions. It is against this background that we have to evaluate most of his deductive poems. They call out for an intellectual summit meet to settle disputes of hearts and minds, customs and practices. He pressed the coming of a great day of change as a reaction to the unjust claims of tyrannical caste superiors. He was the greatest intellectual antibody to caste prejudice in Kerala. One of his major themes in poetry and platform also was social inequality, intolerance and tyranny bred by caste and its by-products like untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability, etc.

In Travancore, the great reform movements starting from below, from the traditionally depressed classes, have transformed the whole social structure producing a remarkable intellectual and social awakening. So, at the time of the famous Vaikkam Satyagraha, the fructification of Sri Narayana's work in Kerala society was apparent and the intensity of caste feeling was definitely on the decline. The oppressive caste practices of early days had become obsolete. Excepting in temples, in no other public place caste found an asylum. Touch taboos, eating taboos and endogamy became less rigid through individual and collective action of the social workers and communal organizations on the one hand and
governmental action on the other. Press and platform were freely resorted to by the reformers to effect disintegration of the fundamentals of caste. Caste, of course, remained not as an institutional incubus but as a sentimental force, both political and social, it had ceased to be a veritable tyranny.

In Kerala, this transformation that had taken place in the content of caste, produced a strange situation which engendered a socio-political outlook very much in the nature of caste nationalism had taken root especially in the large majority of people of Kerala, who remained outcasts and depressed classes. Political liberty, for them was luxury, when compared to the necessary social freedom.

Long before Gandhiji and the Congress thought of temple entry and removal of untouchability, a great movement was going on in Kerala under the leadership of Sri Narayana Guru, the great spiritual preceptor of the Hindus, Kumaran Asan, the post-legislator of Kerala and Dr. P. Palpu, the social revolutionary. Organised attempts were made by the Ezhavas, the prominent class, who were considered untouchable by the Savarnas, to combat social evils like untouchability, unapproachability and prohibition of the lower castes to schools, public offices, courts, temples, etc. Petitioning, persuasion appeal to the Government and direct encounter with the orthodox prejudice, at times, paved the way of social emancipation to a great degree.

Congress, it is plain from its history, continuously ignored the sentiments and interests of the lower classes until at last in 1920, when Gandhi gave a new orientation to its programmes and objectives. Gandhi said in 1920, “Untouchability cannot be given a secondary place in the programme. Without the removal of that taint Swaraj is a meaningless term”.

Untouchability is a hindrance to Swaraj. Its removal is just as essential for Swaraj as the attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity. This is an essentially Hindu question and Hindus cannot claim or take Swaraj till they have restored the liberty of the suppressed classes. They have sunk with the latter’s suppression.”

In the year 1920, the Congress adopted a distinct and unequivocal political resolution for the admission of the depressed classes into Hindu temples. Later on, by the Bardoli resolution of 1922, of which the first item was the removal of untouchability, Gandhiji gave a new social content to the Congress programme. This became a promise of future social reform activity, which attracted the lower sections of the Hindu society to the centre of the nationalist struggle.

Thus when Gandhi began the Yaravada fast, and was nearing a possible death, thousands of caste Hindus took the unprecedented steps of dining with untouchables and admitting them to their temples. Such social cohesiveness appeared in Hindu order much before 1932 and the
best manifestation of it was the Vaikkam Satyagraha of 1924-25, when at the call of Gandhiji, upper caste Hindus, who used to observe rigidly all the caste rules, began to admit the social claims of the lower castes in a humble, penitent and religious spirit. Many of them dropped their title and caste marks, interdined with Ezhavas and other lower castes, and moved hand in hand in the civil disobedience movement against unjust civic disabilities of the avarnas, courting arrest and suffering jail terms as members of one fraternity.

Organised fraternisation of the lower castes by high caste Hindus started in Kerala in 1924 with the Vaikkam Satyagraha, a phenomenon which had no precedent in India till and since then. Before that, as noted earlier a congenial atmosphere for the development of the situation had been created by Sri Narayana Guru and his band of selfless disciples through the S.N.D.P. Yogam.

Vaikkam Satyagraha was a part of the escalating campaign of mass civil disobedience, which marked a major watershed in the political life of Kerala; it was by and large, the outcome of a mighty social movement on the part of the Ezhavas that was on foot for long. It marked, as in the case of any other revolution, the climax of a silent but strong strain of resentment felt and cultivated by the humbler classes for many centuries past against maltreatment, inequality and humiliation at the hands of their caste superiors. Congress, it is true, precipitated the crisis, which was in the air for long.

In 1924, the agitation for social justice was taken over from the social workers by the Indian National Congress. An ardent patriot and radical reformer, T.K. Madhavan, who suffered at the hands of orthodox caste Hindus, was mainly instrumental for converting the social movement into a political agitation.

The lower castes tried to remedy their social, political and religious disabilities through constitutional agitation. The Ezhavas, the most progressive of these communities, were in the forefront of these agitations. They joined hands with the enlightened and sympathetic Savarnas and other non-Hindus in an endeavour to regain some of their equitable liberties, wrongfully withheld from them, through a Petition of Right known as the Malayali Memorial. The native subjects of the Travancore Maharaja organised themselves and drew up a great protest signed by over ten thousand men of different castes, creeds and callings, comprising Nambudiris, Nayars, and Tiyas, Syrian Christians, Native Christians and east Indians, landlords, merchants and officials. The memorialists remonstrated against the lion's share of state patronage and emoluments being doled out to 'foreigners' especially to Brahmans from outside and demanded amelioration of their pitiable condition caused by their systematic exclusion from the higher and in the case of some, from lower too, grades of state service. The greatest number of higher appoint-
ments, said they "is held by foreigners and even among them the number held by Brahmins is more than double that held by Sudra. While 293 foreign Brahmins return one man from among them to fill the higher grades of the service, more than 26 times the number necessary to return a Malayali Sudra and 61 times the number to return a Syrian Christian. Worse than all, there is not a single representative of the Tiya community holding any Government appointment on Rs. 5 or upwards a month in the state, though intelligent and educated men are not wanting among them; whereas several of their castemen in Malabar have been advanced to some of the highest offices of the Unconvenanted Civil Service open to natives of India." The memorialists wanted the Government of Travancore to pass an Act which "would restrict the giving of appointments, as much as possible, to none but natives irrespective of class, caste or creed."

The encouraging result of this constitutional agitation was that the government's attention was riveted on the urgent need to satisfy the caste Hindus and non-Hindus by distributing a fair share in the loaves of state patronage to them. But the Ezhavas were singled out from among the memorialists and the Government stated that any attempt to force their social growth could only end in failure, for they were "confirmed social inferiors".

They submitted two separate petitions, one by Dr. P. Palpu and another signed by 13176 (thirteen thousand one hundred and seventy six) Ezhavas under the leadership of Dr. P. Palpu. The backward position of this "second community in the state in point of numerical importance" was mainly, said the Ezhava Memorialis, due "to the political and educational disabilities in which the Tiyars of Travancore are subjected. At present, no qualification can secure to a Tiya any of these appointments in his own native land unless he becomes a convert to Christianity or Mohamedanism or at least takes shelter under mere Christian or Mohamedan name.

The Government instead of encouraging the spread of English education among the community have thrown barriers across their path, thus excluding them from the only mean of elevation. Several of the English schools in the state, especially those in the mosussil, were still closed to the Tiyas and this accounts partly for the very small number of English educated Tiyas in the state.

Another reason urged against the entertainment of the Tiyas in Public Service is that their social position is low. It is strange that when elsewhere merit is the main qualifications in the State the standard social position required to make one eligible for service under the Sirkar is not stated and it is not known how high the Tiyas have to rise in society to qualify themselves for even such appointments as peons, constables, warders, etc.
Another reason assigned for disqualifying the Tiyas is that public opinion is unfavourable. But this public opinion in Travancore is mainly dependent on the attitude of Government. It is said Hindus in Travancore, unlike their brethren in British Malabar, are more conservative and superstitious and are consequently opposed to the elevation of the Tiyas as a class.

It should be noted that Government in their solicitude to avoid giving rise to antagonism, have, so to speak, only set one class against another. When the two most numerous classes in the State, viz., the Nairs and Tiyas, have learnt to recognise the claims of each other and asked for a due share in the service of the State, Government have pointed out the former as being opposed to the interests of the latter.

These entreaties and remonstrances did not produce any appreciable change in the traditional policy of the state of Travancore and the grievances of the Tiya community, such as the exclusion of their children from most of Government schools and the exclusion of the members of the community from almost all departments of the state service purely on considerations of caste and independently of their aptitude for study or qualifications for entering the state service, still remained unremedied.

Dr. Palpu realised this only when he found that the Government of Travancore were not prepared to countenance the demands of the Ezhavas to treat them on equal terms with other advanced communities. Then he organised the Ezhava Mahajana Sabha in Travancore to fight, in a more systematic and planned way, for their social rights. That was the time when Sri Narayana Guru was making his spiritual conquest in Kerala unbinding a tremendous religio-social awakening, the like of which the country had never seen before or since, with far-reaching implications in the political and economic life of the people. Dr. Palpu's spirit for social reform together with Kumaran Asan's supreme poetical power made a conjunction with Sri Narayana Guru's spiritual influence and from that confluence emerged a socio-religious organization, the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (S.N.D.P. Yogam) which, in the course of a decade or two, brought about a metamorphosis in the pattern of life of Ezhava community throughout Kerala. When this organization came into being, the Government, by necessity, extended recognition to it as a social and political force. Thereafter we find the legitimate demands of the community one by one being conceded. In the second year of the establishment of Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, the Ezhava community as mentioned earlier, was given representation, thereby the government nominating Kumaran Asan, the general secretary of the Yogam, as a member.

Thereafter a regular campaign was carried on for establishing the social privileges and political rights of the Ezhavas and other non-caste Hindus through the Assembly, and later through the Legislative Council.
and other governmental bodies. The Yogam also did all it could to effect social reform within the community. The personal magnetism and charisma of the Guru and the intellectual excellence and poetic genius of Asan worked wonders in the society and within two decades after the establishment of the S.N.D.P. Yogam, the inert Ezhava community turned into a vigorous and progressive social force. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ezhavas, as noted earlier, had no voice of their own; but by 1920, their voice became pre-eminently sharp and clear that the Government considered it expedient to accommodate the interests of that community in the scheme of administration. They became eventually a political force which no single community could rival. The most distressing of the disabilities enumerated in the Ezhava Memorial, and repeated in every session of the Assembly, were the prohibition imposed on the community to utilize certain schools on account of the proximity of them to temples and palaces and also the existence of tindal palakas or prohibitory notice-boards on public roads in the vicinity of temples, which prevented their enjoyment of the right to walk along them. Unapproachability in general and the prevention of the right to walk along these roads in particular had been made the subject of specific petition in the Assembly.

The Government silenced the Ezhava leaders by asking them not to discuss the matter in the Assembly because the religious issue being a sensitive one, and, therefore, with explosive potentialities, was an improper subject for discussion on the floor!

It was Kumaran Asan, who first made a concerted effort to convince the Government of the necessity of removing the bar on the public roads. As early as 1916, when members of the Assembly were not permitted to open the issue of temple entry and connected topics, he animadverted on the existence of notice boards near certain temples prohibiting the entry of non-caste Hindus beyond certain limits in the approach roads leading to these temples and he subjected the Government to criticism on that score. He said, "there were certain public roads and streets to which they were not admitted. Certain places were inaccessible to them on account of proximity of temples. It was Asan's efforts to force the issue of the temple roads on the Government that ultimately compelled them to permit discussion on the question of temple entry in 1922. The suggestion of Kumaran Asan regarding the desirability of an early removal of the boards in question, was carefully considered, and the Government decision in regard to the Vaikkam temple roads was not satisfactory.

At an Ezhava public meeting, held at Vadayar on the 4th May, 1922, points out an Office Note of the Travancore Government, "Mr. Ayyappan, the editor of Sahodaran, who was one of the speakers, expressed his intention of forcible entry into the temples generally and of trespassing
into the sanctum limits of the Vaikkam temple immediately. In pursuance of this declaration, some Ezhavas passed through the roads on the northern and western sides of the outer walls of the latter temple towards evening on the 5th May 1922. No purificatory ceremony was conducted then as the Tantri did not consider that the deity was thereby polluted. As to the action to be adopted against the trespassers legal opinion was solicited and it was considered inadvisable and inexpedient to launch a prosecution against the trespassers”.

This was not an isolated case of Avarnas taking direct social action against the oppression of cast restrictions. At Chengannur, the Government admitted in 1924 that “the roads on the four sides of the temple there, which form part of the temple compound but which lie outside the temple outer walls were being used by the Ezhavas for the last four or five years, that they began to do so after the recent riots near the Puthenkavoo Church and more frequently after the last election to Legislative Council, that though there was some opposition at first from the caste Hindus, there is now no objection raised by the latter.”

These recorded instances clearly indicate that the orthodox sections were not prepared to have a direct confrontation with the Ezhavas and other lower caste men; nor were the government eager to wield the thunder of the state against the breakers of social regulations. In the Vaikkam Satyagraha, this social force of the Avarnas was not in the picture at all and the orthodox caste Hindus and the Government had no fear entertained regarding the violent expression of the submerged wrath or the caste inferiors. They took it only as a non-violent political action on the part of the Indian National Congress, which, they knew, was an ineffective weapon against an unyielding tyrant. So they could afford to remain firm and occasionally be cruel.

When Asan sought the right to move along the outer walls of the temples, he had it in mind, as a sagacious pragmatist in political and social matters, that the dividing line between that right and the right to enter the temple was extremely thin; it was only a matter of time for the final concession. He was a moderate in politics and he resorted to recognised constitutional means to achieve social reforms; but Madhavan believed in direct extremist action for securing the same end. Asan was, in point of fact, not against the right of lower castes to enter temples; he was to be sure, not merely for the right to enter temples for worship but to have the right to perform the tantric rites too in the temple.

But during the period 1921-23, Madhavan was not able to put the programme in action. Agitation still continued through the Assembly. Forty-six Hindu members of the Assembly signed a memorial in 1922 and submitted it to the Government, which urged governmental action for utilizing the Devaswams for the common good of all Hindus and advancement of Hinduism, and for permitting all classes of Hindus to
worship in temples either managed or aided by the Government. This Memorial was the result of the influence exerted by Gandhiji's exhortation.

The S.N.D.P. Yogam had been passing resolutions demanding temple entry at every one of its meetings. Protest meetings were held in various parts of the country against the attitude of the Government and at an important protest meeting held in Trivandrum, C.K. Parameswaran Pillai expressed the feelings of concern and sympathy for Avarnas on behalf of the Savarna Hindus. Other organizations like the Kerala Hindu Sabha, the Nair Service Society, the Yogakshema Sabha, the leading organization of the Nambudiri Brahmans, and the Kshatriya Mahasabha also lent their support to the agitation. The Nair Service Society and the Nair Samajams specially took up the agitation and conducted intensive propaganda throughout the state and created a remarkable awakening among the Savarnas. To the surprise of all, the Nambudiri Yogakshema Sabha also passed resolutions in favour of opening temples to the Avarnas at their annual conference.

With the rise of an enlightened group of caste-Hindus in Kerala, public opinion soon rose in favour of the demands of the non-caste Hindus and other depressed classes. In fact, many of them came forward as leaders of backward communities to advocate their cause. For instance, A. Govinda Pillai chose to serve as the President of the Pulaya Sabha and K.G. Sesha Aiyar that of the Coast Christians. As P. Rajagopalachari, the Diwan of Travancore, said, "I wish we had very many more men like these, men who have sufficient breadth of sympathy to feel for communities not their own, also sufficient foresight to see how vital to the future well-being of the state, as a whole, it is that the backward communities should be lifted up." In creating this upper-caste sympathy, for the cause of lower classes, Asan's part was pre-eminent. It is wellknown that Rajagopalachari, the Brahmin Dewan, had very great affection and regard for Asan and most of his state policies had been directed towards the uplift of these disabled communities because of the personal influence exerted on him by the extraordinary character of Asan.

That the Government of Travancore yielded much too reluctantly to pressure was evident from its stance against the popular demand for temple entry and abolition of untouchability. Thus it may be pointed out that the concessions of backward classes obtained were not free gifts voluntarily doled out to them by the Government. Nor did they emanate from the liberality and generosity of the rulers or their Dewans. The tidal wave of renascent thought created by the spiritual eminence and social philosophy of Sri Narayana Guru and ridden over by the immortal bard and social revolutionary, Asan, could not be prevented and swept back with the wornout and stubby broomstick of Hindu
orthodoxy and by the pudgy palm of unthinking autocracy. Year after year those surging breakers moved forward and swallowed up more and more of the remaining shore of obscurantism. Asan was able to convince the world that no Government could, for long, continue to disregard public opinion and no people would suffer injustice to remain indefinitely.

The magnitude of the change wrought by these two is visible in the villages and cities of Kerala today. A bedlam that was Kerala at the dawn of this century, suddenly shook off its glaring caste villainies and presented the image of a more balanced social relations by the thirties. It had changed beyond recognition within a quarter of a century and the trends of medievalism were nowhere to be seen. Untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability had become things of the past. Today caste distinctions are less pronounced and intercaste marriages more general in Kerala compared to other states where the historical social reform movements originated. This is because here a fundamental and thorough change in the mental frame of social classes was effected whereas in the former this was feeble, as there the reforms were superimposed. In Kerala, the movement for change came from below.

Thus Kumaran Asan's stance in the modern history of Kerala is that of the philosopher of the social revolution that changed the face of the land and ultimately resulted in the political awakening of the depressed classes. Caste nationalism certainly played a prominent role at least at lower levels. The great consequence of this internal revolution in Kerala was that it set the stage for the appearance of political nationalism and it gained momentum as the social inequality and injustice started withering away.
ALL-INDIA DEPRESSED CLASSES LEAGUE

The approaching centenary of the Indian National Congress has focused attention on the heroic and epic struggle of this great organisation all over the world. It has not only achieved freedom for our country but has also given a long spell of political stability. It also inaugurated an era of parliamentary democracy in this country. We have reasons to be proud of the achievements and the enactment of the Constitution by the founding fathers of our nation. But it is also a time for retrospection and reassessment, made more significant by the grave economic, political and social problems of the present day.

The history of our national struggle for independence would not be complete unless we take into account the history of the awakening of the depressed classes who suffered untold miseries and agonies over the ages, as has been so eloquently said by our beloved leader and the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru:

"Real history should deal not with a few individuals here and there but with the people who make up a nation, who work and by their labour produce the necessities and luxuries of life and who in a thousand different ways act and react on each other. Such a history of men would really be a fascinating story."

Let us first look at the socio-economic structure of Indian society during the British Rule.

The British Rule: Its Legacy

By 1858, the country came under the direct rule of the British Parliament. India, on the eve of British conquest, presented a pitious spectacle of a conflict of faith and ideals, of a blend of bigotry and equally blind scepticism of rank atheism side by side with a sanctionious Brahmanism, and of an utter laxity of mortal and religious discipline countenanced and supported by a pharisaic appeal to scriptural sanction of a caste-ridden, convention-ridden and priest-rule society. Ballads, still sung by village bards in the eastern districts of Bengal, give a vivid picture of insecurity of life and property on the confines of the Mughal Empire, even during the period when Mughal power was at
its height; and by the close of the seventeenth century, it was already clear that Moghal rule had reached and passed its zenith. Throughout the eighteenth century, India was a prey to all those tyrannies and disorders, which have been invariable experience of the people, when thrones had wilted and tottered to the dust. The picture of society was that of a torn caravan lost in the desert of confusion and anarchy.

India's internal strength was being ruined by internecine wars among princely states against each other. To quote R.C. Dutt:

"Indeed, in many respects the tenth and eleventh centuries in India resembled the Middle Ages in Europe. A noble religion had become the monopoly of priests, and had been all but smothered with childish legends and image worship. War and sovereignty were the monopoly of another caste, the Rajput Kshatriyas of India, and the feudal barons of Europe who had both come to the forefront from the struggles of the preceding Dark Ages. The people were ignorant, despaired, enslaved, in our country as in the other. . . Everything bore the appearance of dis-integration and decay; and the national life seemed extinct. But here the parallel ends. The study feudal barons of Europe soon mixed with the people, fought the people's battle in the field, the council board or the country-house, and thus infused a new and vigorous life in modern nations. In India, the caste system prevented such a fusion and the Rajput Kshatriyas, isolated from the people soon fell a prey to foreign invaders, and were involved in a common ruin. Great is the penalty which Hindus have paid for their caste disunion and their political weakness. For six centuries after 1200 AD the history of the Hindus is a blank."

Away from the pump and peagentry of the Mughals, there were millions of the emaciated, poverty-stricken masses in the country, who were left entirely to the frowns and smiles of the landed aristocracy and the privileged. Added to the economic deprivities were their fatalistic attitude. Their future rested on the bosom of the gods. It was their absolute belief that their fortunes could not be reversed. A handful of rice, a cotton rag (not for all), a mud hut constituted their only necessities. As under the feudal system of Europe in the Middle Ages, the social ideal under the caste system was static and social gradations enveloped the society. Worst was the lot of the peasant and the depressed castes. The customs, traditions and age-long superstitions dominated over the entire Hindu population. The scientific spirit was yet to be born. The educational methods, the mass of literature, which the people (if they did learn) was devoid of scientific knowledge. Instead of teaching the people to know scientific knowledge and how natural forces can best be harnessed, they have been taught to write notes on 'archaic phrases' in the works of sixteenth and seventeenth century Englishman and to learn by note the personal history of obscure ruler of a foreign land. The
whole pyramid of the India’s woes, material and spiritual—poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness rested upon a rock bottom physical base. The base was simply his manner of getting into the world and his sex life thenceforward. The society on the whole was on the brink of destruction. The decay and degeneration prevailed the rump of what was once the Mughal splendour. The fate of the depressed classes in such a society was abject slavery and suffering.

There was no established authority whose law could be obeyed. Fear of governing power was missing from the minds of the people and the state had fallen into wretched condition. The law, the courts, the justice were all cancerous. The courts were very unpopular and the seats of great corruption.

Let us see how these villages are described by one of the most committed civil servants in India, Sir Charles Metcalfe:

“The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down, revolution succeeds revolution; Hindu, Pathan, Mughal, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are masters in turn, but the village communities remain the same. In times of trouble, they arm and fortify themselves, a hostile army passes through the country: the village community collect their cattle within their walls and let the army pass unprovoked, if plunder and devastation be directed against themselves, and the force employed be irresistible, they flee to friendly village at a distance, but when the storm has passed over they return and resume their occupation...

...If a country remains for a series of years the scene of continual pillage and massacre, so that the villages cannot be inhabited, the villagers nevertheless return wherever the power of peaceable possession revives. A generation may pass away but the succeeding generations will return. The sons will take the place of their fathers, the same lands will be reoccupied by the descendants of those who were drawn out when the villages were depopulated; and it is not a trifling matter that will drive them out, for they will often maintain their post through times of disturbance and convulsion, and acquire strength sufficient to resist pillage and oppression with success.”

Zenith of Feudalism: Later Mughals: State of Society

By levish grants of jagirs; the Mughals had created a powerful bureaucracy which was semi-official and feudal in character. When the authority of the Mughal Crown declined and the law of escheat was relaxed in application, the owners of jagirs set up virtually as hereditary landed chiefs. They exercised executive and judicial authority, which gave them a highly privileged position over others and they could easily
defy or override the rule of law.

An Englishman visiting Orissa in the year 1766 at the order of Lord Clive describes the feudal chiefs as "the giants of the feudal ages". According to Sir George Forest, in the pre-British period, the "local princes of the Deccan were the Jagirdars or owners of Jagirs, which, both in nature and history, had a strong resemblance of feudal beneficences. The Jagirs, as in Europe, came in course of time to be regarded in the light of hereditary property."

After perusing the accounts of the period, the impression left on one's mind is that the landed nobility was the strongest single class holding the masses like chattel under its claws. In a feudal society both power and prosperity are concentrated on this dominant minority. Robert Orme says:

"...Every head of a village calls his habitation the Sarbar and plunders of their meal and roots the wretches of his precinct: from the Zamindar exports the small pittance of silver, which his penurious tyranny has scraped together. The Fouladar seizes upon the greatest share of Zamindar's collections, and then secures the favour of his Nabob, by voluntary contributions which leave him not possessed of the half of his rapines and exactions. The Nabob fixes his rapacious eye on every portion of wealth which appears in his province...subject to such oppressions, property in Indostan is seldom seen to descend to the third generation."

"In a Government like that of India", says Alexender Dow, "public spirit is never seen, and loyalty is a thing unknown. The people permit themselves to be transferred from one tyrant to another."

This cold attitude of the people was fatal to the political interests of the society, and was a sequel to the domination exercised over society by morally degraded, selfish, ambitious, ruling chiefs and their cliques. None has bothered to see as to how they could be initiated into an orbit of social consciousness.

The degradation of popular Hinduism and the low moral and the intellectual level of the masses have been especially commented upon by the foreigners. Dubois observes that the Hindus had fallen very low from the eminent cultural heights of their ancestors. "That they are now far behind the people who inscribed their names long after them on the roll of civilized nations." Alexender Dow, an equally intelligent critic of the period, says that philosophy and sciences had made substantial progress in 'former ages', but that was merely a subject of past history. Forester declares:

"The human mind will naturally feel a sense of sorrow and pity for a people who have fallen from no conspicuous a height of glory and fortune, and who probably have contributed to polish and exalt the nations, who now hold them in subjection."

According to Forbes, who minutely studied Indian life in Gujarat and South-Eastern regions, the different sciences of mathematics, astronomy and the art of music, painting, sculptor, etc. were "at the lowest ebb in India". Their revival could only be possible "under the auspices of peace and liberty". Much of what we prize in Indian culture was not people's creation, but the product of a small literary section of the upper classes working under the inspiration of aristocracy. The social system, which was dominated by the nobility and the priest caste, naturally resulted in the degeneration of society as a whole.

Unequal Agrarian Society: The Lot of the Rural Poor
(Scheduled Castes)

About three-fourth of the total population of Peninsular India remain employed as labour in agriculture or occupations dependent on agriculture during three months of July, August and September, they are idle and almost on the verge of starvation. This was the state of affairs at the close of the century. Conditions were not far different in northern India. In 1809, Buchanan estimated that out of a total population of 2,735,000 in the district of Rangpur in Bengal, only 326,000 worked as artificers, while 343,000 mostly Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Muslims and others, who had purchased their estates at auction did not work at all, constituted agricultural labour or peasantry. In the province of Bihar, the cultivators formed 70 to 80 per cent of the total population. These estimates will certainly not hold true for the first quarter of the second half of the century when agriculture and industry in the lower classes went hand in hand and internal industrial economy was not very much adversely affected by foreign capitalistic influences. The villages were the homes of the landed community, landless labour as well as the landed peasantry and gentry. The urban areas were mostly peopled by commercial classes and government servants. In northern India, the prominent agricultural castes like Jats, Gujars, Ahirs, Kurmis, etc., were the backbone of the peasantry, though they did not occupy a respectable status in society forming the broad Sudra group. They led a hard life of honest work, innocent amusements and possessed a remarkable simplicity in manners and sincerity of character. The Muslims engaged themselves little in agriculture, commerce, and military service were their favourite pursuits. The Brahmans, Rajputs and Vaisyas also considered it derogatory to till land or work in industry; so the bulk of the population, degraded in the social scale, provided the sinews of national production.

Various Classes: Their Degradation

Menial classes, slaves and outcastes: The rest of the population constituted the depressed group of the society. In this group may be included the various menial classes, vagrants, beggars, slaves and primitive
tribes. These people lived under conditions which do not give honour to society. The European accounts paint them as subject and savage victims of grovelling superstitions, destitute in all moral sense and given to every indulgence. They also emphasize that they were held in utter contempt in society and the social taboos did not permit them to grow in moral stature. In the province of Bihar, Buchanan writes, how the various sweepers and scavanger classes, the Doms, Dharkars, Maghis, etc., dealing in animals' skins and professions pertaining to sanitation, lived in isolated localities and were considered very vile and impure. The various primitive tribes like Mushahars, Bungihars, Rajwars, Dhanggars, Kanjjaras were very much deprived and even ate the flesh of cows, horses, asses, rats, etc. Dubois describes such classes as “social outcasts”, who were looked upon almost as slaves by the upper classes. In South India, the Parihas and the Chucklers, the most notable depressed classes were, however, very useful part of society as they constituted the rural proletariat. The Valluvas, “who are called the Brahmans of the Parishes in Mockery”, were their priests. But they were not permitted to dabble in astronomy. The Moochis were also a very degraded class in the social scale and the other lower classes of Sudras, too, did not condescend to give them even a drop of water. On account of their handling the skins of the dead animals, they were considered a very impure class. The various nomad tribes like the Lombadis, the Wuddars, the Pakanattis, etc., are mentioned as classified with the depressed classes. The jugglers, the charlatans, conjurers, acrobats, rope dancers, etc., too, ranked with these degraded beings. All these had their peculiar customs and practices, quite distinct from those of the civilized part of the society, and are spoke of as constituting more than a quarter of the entire population.

Gradation Honeycombed with Inequalities

The Hindu social organisation was absolutely dominated by the institution of caste which, as Max Webber observes, signifies the ehancement and transformation of social distance. A man without caste was an insulting epithet, which in no case could be forgiven or forgotten.

Social Disabilities

The low castes were the perpetual menial stock of society with freedom of movement severely curtailed, and without any claims for free citizenship. They could not claim independent property rights and in Malabar, they were actually held as ‘slaves’, belonging to the feudal lords for whom they worked. They could not participate even in public religious processions of other classes and in South India, even their presence and foot prints could defile the localities of Brahmans. Dubois says that in Indian States, a Pariah for his audacity to enter a Brahman's
house "might possibly be murdered on the spot" that "a revolting crime of this sort was actually perpetuated" without a voice being raised in expostulation. Their admission into Hindu temples was altogether out of question; they were also not entitled to the use of public utilities like wells. Even professional prostitutes and slaves of other cates, however low, are mentioned to have no truck with them. They were only patronized by Europeans for domestic service, as people of other castes considered it degrading to seek service in their households. Relegated to social contempt and ridicule, it is not surprising if in their mode of life they did not share the decency and refinement of the rest of society.

Oppression and Exploitation by a Few over Many

The rural life, as presented by the contemporary accounts, emerges the picture of the four classes. The agriculture labourers came from all castes and classes. They worked for the landlords (Zamindars). They had neither the trade unions nor any government tribunal for fixation of their wages. They were divided lot, each by caste considerations. The last order, which constituted the poor 'haves not', were the artisans and menials. They were known by different contemptuous terms viz. 'kamin', 'chamar', etc. The lowly chamar (cobbler), the Balai (the dragger or puller of the dead cow, ox, etc.), the Mehar (dhed), the Mang (outcastes), all castes continued to work as menials. Even today their hemlets are separate and located outside the village; the Mahar watandar in Maharashtra presents a typical picture.

The Mahar for all intents and purposes was an untouchable; there was no entry for him in the temple; the Hindu would be polluted; there was no entry for him in school; his children would be required to sit at a distance; there were separate wells for him; and during the Peshwa rule, the untouchables had to put around their necks a pit in which they could spit not on the ground and they had to tie a broom while walking looking at the back so that the twice born could know that a Mahar or a Mong had trod that road. If they by chance had heard the sacred text (Veda), a molten lead would be poured into their ears.

Under the Anhildwada kings (AD 1094-1143), the Dhedas (outcastes) used to wear a stag's horn tied to their waists. There was time when from the black cord round the neck was suspended in the front; a black cast hen pot for use as a spittoon and from behind there tailed on the ground a branch of the wild plum to obliterate the imprint of the Mahar's feet on the dust. The Mahar and other untouchables during the thirties were not permitted to enter the Brahman's houses in Poona before nine in the morning or after three in the afternoon lest their shadow fell on a Brahman. The Bombay Gazetteer published in 1884-85 says: "Their touch, even the touch of their shadow, is thought to defile and in some outlying villages, in the early morning, the Mahar, as he passed the village, may be
seen crouching that his shadow may not fall on the water drawers.

Most parts of the world have had their type of what ward calls the lowly. The Romans had their slaves, the Spartans their herlots, the American their Negroes; so we have the depressed classes called by various names.

Movement for the Political Freedom and Social Reforms: The Acrimony

The most basic and fundamental question, which was posed diesfaced national movement launched by the Indian National Congress, was: Should social reform precede the massive struggle for independence? Those who were the champions of social reform asserted that the reasons for the backwardness of the Indian society, poverty, and inequitable social structure, was the prevailing watertight compartments of graded inequality and caste. To them, therefore, it was essential to transform or reconstruct the old social order on the basis of social justice and equality. But for those, who first wanted political freedom for the country from the alien rule, opined that the real reason for the backwardness of the society was not dharma, nor the society but our bondage to the alien rule. To them, political subjection was the worst form of slavery. Therefore, they must all unite first to wrest political freedom. Only then all other social problems and evils shall wither away. They also felt that any attempt to embark upon social problems would tend to weaken the national front and the struggle, and, therefore, unity of purpose was essential for the massive national struggle against foreign domination.

Aurobindo Ghose said:

"The political movement could not afford to cut itself off from the great mass of the nation or split itself up into warring functions by premature association of the social reform question with politics."

The National Social Conference founded by Justice Ranade was hardly an organised institution, and almost got itself attached to the Congress in some what subordinate relationship. With the passing away of Ranade, the Social Conference slowly died an unnatural death and yet the problem of giving socio-economic justice to the millions of the depressed classes even after the independence looms large. To ignore millions of the down-trodden would in itself be a sufficiently great error on the part of those who run this gigantic political democracy.

The problem today is the restoration of the individual to his place at the centre of social life. 'The State', as Laski argues, 'must provide them, with means at least adequate to a full perception of life; for, otherwise the purpose of the State is at one stroke negativized for them'.

19th Century Social Reform Movement and Its Impact

The chief character of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolt lay in secular motives on humanism and equality so as to bring about the
transformation of Hindu society on the egalitarian principles. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was the ‘herald of the age’, who poured ridicule on the amazing inequalities. His was a revolt against the inequitous Hindu caste structure. He said:

“The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable division and sub-division among them was entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling. . .”

Roy found “Hindus in general more superstitious and miserable, both in performance of their religious rites, and in their domestic concerns than the rest of the known nations on the earth.”

Sardar Gopal Hari Deshulk “Lekahitwadi” (1823-1892), condemned the traditional Brahmin monopoly of education and religious life. As early as in 1840s, he had written in Marathi: “The priests are very unholy because they repeat things without understanding their meaning and profanely reduce knowledge to such repetition. The Pundits are worse than priests, because they more ignorant and also are haughty. . . who are the Brahmins and in what respects do they differ from us? Have they twenty hands and do we lack something in us. When such questions are now asked, the Brahmins should give up their foolish concepts; they must accept that all men are equal and everybody has a right to acquire knowledge.” His attacks continued and were joined by the vigorous writer and social reformer, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1857-1895). Agarkar also wrote in Marathi so that his words would have the greatest possible effect on the prevailing social structure and superstition. Vivekananda’s thought marked the culmination of the nineteenth century social revolt.

Ramakrishna’s impact on Bengali thought has been immeasurable, and he has been credited with assisting in large part the growth of national awakening and social awareness. His influence on social reform, after his death in 1900, was a curious mixture of traditional and modern ideas. Needless to say, where were other socio-religious movements also exhorting the people to treat the untouchability as a sin to be denounced in totality. They did bring about a change in the stubborn attitude of the diehards *vis-a-vis* the depressed classes. They were necessarily conducive to the creation of a healthy atmosphere for social change. Disraeli rightly said:

“A political institution is a machine; the motive power is the national character. With that it rests, whether the machine will benefit society, or destroy it. Society in this country is perplexed almost paralysed; in time it will move, and it will devise. How are the elements of the nation to be blended again together? In what spirit is that reorganization to take place?”
Mahatma Jotiba Phule's Pioneering Work (1827-1890)

Mahatma Jotiba Phule was the first mass based leader of the oppressed and depressed. He was thoroughly dissatisfied with piece-meal social reform movement launched by Justice Ranade. He was the inaugurato r of a completely new type of society, which would stand against the caste-ridden, inequitous Hindu social system. The strongest single impression that one gets on reading the crusades of Phule is his remorseless hatred of religious dogmas and traditions, which bound a vast humanity to the chariot of a few. He was of the foremost opinion and conviction that men should not be enslaved by the scriptural commandments written by the vested interests to perpetuate their hegemony over fellow creatures.

The dauntless courage he showed in ushering a social revolution had earned him high respect. He said, "Untouchability is a blot on Hinduism and unless that is abolished, Hinduism cannot be a true religion in the stricter sense of the term? Phule combined in him the revolutionary teachings of the Buddha and Kabir. He was not a highly educated person. He dressed, lived, and talked in the language of the masses. He was the first Indian to start a school for the depressed classes in 1848. This was undoubtedly a great movement as in those days, it was a crime to write and speak against Brahmins. He wanted 'to liberalise the low born from the thraldom of the sacrootal authority and make the depressed classes conscious of their rights by education them'. He wrote a brochure 'Slavery' and published it in June 1873. It was a pioneering and piercing attack against the self-styled custodians of Hindu law. In it, he denounced the Brahminical scriptures, which enchained the Shudras to the Brahman. He wrote:

"Liberty is essential to every man. To bestow liberty on man, who does not enjoy it, is the duty of every good man under the sun. It is a great achievement to recapture the God-given rights of every human being who has been deprived of it. A self-respecting man would not falter to do this act. Every human being needs proper rights for his or her happiness. To confer freedom on every human being by liberating him from injustice, is the main object of noble men who undertake such great tasks at the risk of their lives."

He awakened self-respect among the depressed classes. He infused courage in them to stand up against the tyranny and social injustice.

Social Reform in Andhra

Guduru Ramchandra Rao, Vemuri Ramji Rao, Nallapatti Hanumantha Rao, V.K. Murthy, K.K. Nageshwar Rao Puntulu and Mangipudi Vekata Sarma all worked for the amelioration of the depressed classes in Andhra. Also among other notable persons were Gujula Lekshmi
Narasu Chetty of Madras, Puduri Ananthu Sastry of Nellore, Kandukure Veerlsaengam Puntalu, Chelakumarte Lekshmi Narasimhan and R. Venkataraman Naidu, Chilakamarte Lekshmi Narasimhan, a famous Telugu writer, founded in 1909 a school for the Panchamas at Rajahmundry. R. Venkataratnam Naidu (1862-1939) dedicated his life for the emancipation of depressed classes. Guduru Ramchandra Rao took an oath of not taking up family life until untouchability was eradicated. He established Seva-ashrama (an institution for service) at Gudivada in 1912. Mahatma Gandhi visited their Ashram in 1920 and was deeply impressed. All these efforts resulted in the first Harijan Conference held in 1917 at Vijayawada by Guduru Ramchandra Rao. They focused the attention on the fact that the Panchamas were the original residents and rulers of the country. This was a new awakening in the Harijans. The movement gave birth to the growth of literature for the dissemination of consciousness and awakening among the Harijans. The Kanaker Durger Temple at Vijayavada was closed by the orthodox temple owners for fear of forcible temple entry by the Harijans. Also the Government of Madras appointed in 1920 a Commissioner to look after the welfare of these classes. It was because of the constant pressure put by the Conference, taking place year after year, that the Madras Government accepted the principle of nominating the Harijans to representative bodies.

In Telengana also, organisations like “Jaganmitra Mandli” founded (1906) by M.V. Bhaghy Reddy Verma, a well-known leader of these classes, created a tremendous stir and awakening. In 1918, an English monthly The Panchama was started by J.S. Muthiah. Thakkar Bapa, a veteran social worker and General Secretary of all-India Harijan Sevak Sangh, paid a visit to Hyderabad in January 1933 and opened a branch of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. For the first time, the Nizam also appointed a committee to consider the suggestions for constitutional reforms; as a sequel to the commencement of reform in July 1839, in a house of 85 members, 5 seats were allotted to the Depressed Classes out of the 50 per cent quota of the Hindus. In 1938, B.S. Venkat Rao founded the Hyderabad Depressed Classes Association. Venkat Rao, because of his work for the self-respect movement among the depressed classes, was known as ‘Dakshina Ambedkar’.

Damodaran Sanjivayya (1921-1972)

Damodaran Sanjivayya hailed from a Harijan family and was born in 1921 at the village of Paddapadu in Kurnool district, in the Royalseema area (Andhra Pradesh). After graduation, he entered government service and became an inspector of civil supplies. He won the 1952 election and immediately became a minister in the Madras Government under Chakravarti Rajagopalachari at the age of 31. He worked for
Harijan uplift and was known for his commitment to the down-trodden. He became Chief Minister of Andhra in 1960. He was also included in the Central Cabinet by Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1970-71. He was also the President of the All-India Harijan Federation and did praiseworthy work as the leader of the depressed classes. He was often called the ‘only gentleman among politicians’.

In the meantime, the Christian missionaries did yeoman’s service to a considerable extent in the cause of the depressed castes and scheduled tribes. The Prarthana Samaj also did not lag behind. The work of Vithal Ramji Shinde is undoubtedly laudable. He founded the Depressed Classes Mission of India in 1906 for ameliorating the pitiable conditions of the depressed castes. He was ably supported by Chardavarkar. By 1813, this mission maintained 30 educational institutions throughout Bombay and Madras. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the political guru of Mahatma Gandhi, found the servants of India Society and made the uplift of the depressed castes as one of its objectives. The National Social Conference, which was earlier dominated by caste-ridden conservative Brahmins adopted a resolution in 1908, exhorting the people to these caste rigidities. Chardavarkar and Shinde picked up the thread from Phule and insisted upon the Social Conference to include stringent resolution to end the caste discrimination. This is what Shinde had said at the 1908 session of the Conference:

“...The Pariah has no place even in this pandal and even before the national altar... the Pariah is to be elevated, not because he is a part of our nation but because he is a human being... This Resolution has been put to you on behalf of the righteousness. But who cares for righteousness in these days?... I must present myself to you as a nationalist, then alone I have some opportunity to hearing by you.”

Gopal Krishna Gokhale seconded this resolution.

The Thiyas and Ezhavas of Malabar suffered severe disabilities. Their approach within 36 feet polluted the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and high-caste Sudras. Narayan Guru (1856-1928) hailed from this community. Like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, he lifted the community out of object degradation. He built up an extensive network of temples and schools, served by dedicated workers from the Ezhavan community. Like Chokhoba in Maharashtra, he came to be revered as a saint by Muslims, Christians and Hindus alike. His socio-economic movement took shape in the later years as the Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalan Yogma (SNDP), which today is the Ezhava community’s main social organisation with considerable clout. He gave to the world the cherished ideal of ‘One god, one religion, one caste for mankind’. The Sibageri centre, which he had set up at Varkala, 55 km north of Trivandrum, is today a place of Pilgrimage.

Dr. Ambedkar had a profound influence on the non-Brahman move-
ments in Madras Presidency. The Adi-dravida forces looked to him for a definite message. In 1944, the Justice Party and the Self-Respect League were fused into a compact strong organisation. The Dravida Kazagham leader was the Periyar E.V. Rama Swami Naicker. This new wave was a total revolt against the myth and mythology of caste hierarchical priests dominated Hinduism. The temple-entry movement by the Harijans (or Adi-Dravidas) was encouraged and the great Periyar preached for revolutionary social reforms. This movement inculcated a militant attitude in the Adi-Dravidas (Harijans), but by 1950s after the split in the Dravida Kazagham, the breakaway group the ‘Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam’ (DMK) departed from the stand of the Periyar, i.e. it turned its attention away from the depressed classes (Adi-Dravidas) and concentrated on the backward classes, a distinct departure to reconcile with the inequitous caste system, with the result the privileged backward classes now have majority over the age-old, ignored downtrodden section. This was a political orientation and power ideology of the DMK as against the Congress.

The Maharaja Gaikwad of Baroda in his address to the Social Conference in 1904 denounced caste but even his was a half-hearted cautious appeal. But he lent a great hand to V.R. Shinde for organising the Depressed Class Mission in Baroda (1906). The Maharaja with his concern for the downt-rodden had already set up schools for the depressed classes, and at Shinde’s persuasion reserved scholarships for their higher education. At a later stage, the indomitable and great messiah of the depressed classes, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was the fittest fruit of this great patronage.

It was in 1917 that the Indian National Congress, under the presidency of Mrs. Annie Besant, departed from its established practice of side-tracking burning social issues such as castes etc., and adopted a resolution exhorting the people of India “the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom on the depressed classes, the disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting these classes to considerable hardship and inconvenience.”

Earlier the Depressed Classes Mission Society adopted a resolution, which read as under:

“That the Chairman of this meeting be authorised to request the Indian National Congress to pass at its forthcoming session a distinct and independent resolution declaring to the people of India at large the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all the disabilities imposed by religion and custom upon the Depressed Classes, those disabilities being of a most vexatious and oppressive character, subjecting these classes to considerable hardship and inconvenience by prohibiting them from admission to public schools, hospitals, court of justice and
public offices and the use of public wells, etc. These disabilities, social in origin, amount in law and practice to political disabilities and as such fall legitimately within the political mission and propaganda of the Indian National Congress."

Perhaps the conservative elements like Lokmanya Tilak (anti-reformer) and hitherto uninterested Mrs. Besant could be mollified to a great extent by this historic resolution of the Depressed Classes Mission Society. It is interesting to note that after 32 years of its birth, now the great Indian National Congress was concerned about the plight of these people, which may perhaps be a political expediency. It should be recalled here that the Theosophical Society, under Colonel Olcott, had done educational work among these classes. Narayan Chandravarkar visited Malabar in 1920 and reaffirmed in strong words the need for educating these people. After addressing a session of the Depressed Classes Conference, he led a procession of 5,000 people to the forbidden road of Cochin Fort. It was largely due to his influence that the Government of Bombay had declared a policy of equal rights to educational facilities for the people.

Saint Gadge Maharaj (1880-1956)

Maharashtra is a land of saints. In addition to the rich soil, the land is known for a galaxy of many saints and religious reformers. The foundation stone of the splendid fabric and social reforms was laid by Dhaneshwar and Namdeva, Eknath, Chokhoba and Tukaram. They built a great edifice of religious fervour to which Gadge Maharaj gave an excellent finish. His name is familiar in Maharashtra. His maxim was:

"Oh people! don't worship the stones but worship the man".

He put on the garb of a darvesh or mendicant, eating and drinking in earthen pots. The main theme of his songs (Kirtan) was the uplift of the poor Harijans. He preached the gospel of equality for 50 years and collected money for the poor and down-trodden. He bought the 'Chokhamela' rest house at a cost of Rs.1,00,000 at Pandharpur and handed it over to Dr. Ambedkar for the use of untouchables.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Upliftment of the Harijans

The entry of Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian political scene brought about a sea-change in the outlook of the Indian National Congress towards the problem of the upliftment of the depressed classes (Harijans).

"I don't want to be reborn", Mahatma Gandhi once said, "but if I have to be reborn, I should be reborn as an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled against them in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable
condition."

To pursue his campaign against this stigma of Hindu society, he started in February 1933, a weekly Harijan to arouse the conscience of the caste Hindus and create a goodwill for the oppressed.

At the age of 65, Mahatma Gandhi started on a whirlwind tour for nine months on 7 November 1933, from Wardha, for the upliftment of the Harijans. He pleaded that the untouchable Hindus should have access to all public institutions such as schools, roads, public wells, etc. He said that a sum of about Rs.20,00,000 had been spent for the removal of untouchability and the upliftment of the Harijans. At a meeting in Nagpur, eggs were thrown at him by the traditionalists and conservative Hindus. Pandit Lalanath, a sanatanist leader and his fanatical followers from north India along with other workers, made abortive attempts to hold up Gondhiji's car at Dhamangaon and Amravati, and at Akola by even laying prostrate before it. He also toured Raipur, Itarsi, Anantpur and Jabalpur. On 16 December 1933, Gandhiji commended his Harijan tour in south India. While giving an interview to a Harijan deputation, he said, "Untouchability is a dead thing, but being a monster it still seems to be taking breath. But it is the last breath." He visited Guntur, Ellore, Rajamundhary, Vishakhapatnam and other places. On 4 January 1934 he visited the old Mysore State.

On 10 January 1934, he commenced his tour of Malabar, the worst spot on the 'untouchability map' of India. The memory of Nayadis (unapproachables) would always haunt him. At a Guru vayur meeting, some men were wounded in the scuffle that ensued between pro-Gandhi volunteers and the volunteers sent by the Varnashram Sangh from north India. During the tour, some women gave him bangles, necklaces and so on. He profusely expressed his greatfulness in his weekly Harijan. He also toured Kottayam and Allepy in Kerala. A little more than a week later, when he visited Trivandrum, he was happy to find that the state of Travancore had already declared open public roads, wells and Chatrams to all classes of people. The Maharaja was cold towards him and Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, the Diwan, did not even meet him.

Mahatma Gandhi also toured Karnataka and Orissa after completing the great historic task for the cause of the scheduled castes. He arrived in Allahabad on 11 March 1934. He ended his tour at Varanasi on 29 July 1934 where the Sanatanists led by the reactionary, Pandit Lalanath, publicly burnt Gandhiji’s portrait and distributed inflammatory leaflets against him. Gandhiji undertook the 12,500-mile tour for a cause, which was so dear to him and made it an all-India issue. At the conclusion of his tour, he said, "The impression left on my mind is that untouchability is on its last legs."

Gandhiji's committed concern to uplift the depressed classes had two specific results: (1) The organisation of the All-India Harijan Sevak
Sangh, with a central office and large funds, helped to support a number of workers and work among the Harijans. His personal magneticism and frequent fasts roused the conscience of the caste Hindus and quite effectively reduced the antagonism of the orthodox and reactionary Hindus. (2) The Congress as the only effective all-India organisation made the depressed classes uplift as one of its major programmes.

Dr. Ambedkar’s Crusade against Untouchability

Dr. Ambedkar’s crusade for the emancipation of the untouchables and his sustained sceptism about the Hindu orthodoxy and their intentions vis-a-vis the Harijans maintained an active interest in the depressed classes. But his deep-rooted malady is a part of Hindu social system and it is indeed a difficult task to annihilate it unless the ‘caste’ itself in Hindu organism is rooted out root and branch.

Dr. Ambedkar transformed the hitherto languid helpless among the people into a political force to be reckoned with, and ably and superbly fought for their political claims; which were concerned in the Constitution of 1935. He exhorted in many of his speeches, books and papers that ‘Indians should also practice democracy in the social sphere and reconstruct social order and relations between individuals on the basis of democratic principles of equality, liberty and fraternity’.

His Movement—Nationalism

Dr. Ambedkar was a nationalist of the highest order. He exhorted his followers to rise to the occasion. He said:

“Before the British, you were in a loathsome due to your untouchability. What has the British Government done to remove your untouchability? Before the British, you could not draw water from the village wells. Has the British Government secured you the right to the wells? Before the British, you could not enter the temple. Can you enter there now? Before the British you were denied entry into the police force. Does the British Government admit you to the force?”

Exhorting the depressed classes to be their own masters, he said:

“Nobody can remove your grievances as well as you can and you cannot remain free unless you get political power with your hands... We must have a government in which men in power will not be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life, which the dictates of justic and expediency so urgently called for. This role the British will never be able to play. It is only a government which is of the people, for the people and by the people; in other words, it is only the Swaraj government that will make it possible.”

The above statement of Dr. Ambedkar could be verified by a statement of Brailsford given below:

“Nonetheless, our official policy was then and is now to interfere as
little as possible with Indian institutions. It tolerated social customs injurious to health, notable child marriage, and accepted even `untouchability as an immutable fact in an environment it dared not alter. Our courts, as time went on, took to administering Hindu law with an almost antiquarian fidelity. The result of this attitude was unquestionably to stereotype the past in a land that never has discarded it with ease."

Dr. Ambedkar's Gospel

Dr. Ambedkar's gospel for the emancipation of the depressed classes could be summarised as below:

1. The depressed classes should revolt because slavery to which they are fastened by caste dogmas must be liquidated. The scriptures, which so have ordained them to be so, must be disowned.

2. There should be a strong political organisation led by them only to the path of salvation. Thus he formed the All-India Labour Party, the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation and, just before his death, the Republican Party of India.

3. Education and literature being the vehicles of the principles of an egalitarian order, he established his own papers Muk Naik (Leader of the Dump), Balishkrat Bharat (the degraded India), and Janta (The People). These papers created a great awakening among the depressed classes to work for their own emancipation. He founded the People's Education Society, which runs Siddharth College of Arts, Science and Commerce in Bombay, Mahad and Milind Mahavidyalaya, Aurangabad. These institutions produced hundreds of students, who are strong militant and conscious of their rights.

4. He sought to put forward a separate identity of the class interest of the depressed castes all over India. He fought with the British rule and also with the vested interests of claiming a place for them in the future Constitution of India. He submitted to the Round Table Conference (Minorities Committee) a historic memorandum, the gist of which is as under:

(a) Equal citizenship and fundamental rights, declaring the practice of untouchability as illegal;

(b) Adequate constitutional remedies to protect them against any socio-economic exploitation and discrimination;

(c) Adequate representation to them in the legislature, service, etc.

(d) A seat in the Central Cabinet and to have an opportunity of framing the general policy of the government.

How strong are the ways of destiny. He was entrusted with the task of piloting the Constitution of India. It must have been a soul satisfaction to Mahatma Gandhi. It is interesting to read what Dr.
Ambedkar had said, "If there is any cause of freedom in the Indian turmoil for Independence, it is the cause of the depressed classes. The cause of the caste Hindus and the cause of the Musalmans is not the cause of freedom. There is a struggle for power as distinguished from freedom. Consequently, it has always been a matter of surprise to me that no party and no organisation devoted to the cause of freedom, has so far interested itself in the untouchables." As regards the representation of the depressed classes, the Nehru Report earlier had said:

"In our suggestions for the Constitution, we have not made any special provision for the representation of the depressed classes in the Legislatures. That could only be done by way of special electorates or by nomination."

**Mahatma Gandhi and His Contribution**

The Indian society as a political entity consists of different homogeneous and heterogeneous cultural elements with predominating Hindu religious values and norms. Without entering into an argument regarding the intrinsic qualities of a social order based on a caste system, as it exists today, it is evident that caste generates inequalities of all sorts. As a matter of fact, the Hindu society is legitimately regarded as one of the best examples of a hierarchical stratification of a social order intended to perpetuate inequalities. Gandhiji realised the injustice perpetuated on account of the practice of caste and took up the question of the Harijans. He observed fasts unto death for their better treatment. He preferred to live with them wherever he went in spite of the palatial mansions put at his disposal. His was a dedicated life for the upliftment of these poor social outcastes, who were disowned and discarded by the caste Hindus. Whether it was Kashmir or Kerala, Assam or Bombay, Gandhi was on the spot fighting for their cause. Gandhiji's Vaikom Safiyagraha was an eye-opener to the caste Hindus all over the country and was responsible for arousing social consciousness in regard to the oppression and different forms of exploitation of the lower castes, who all were branded as 'untouchables'. Gandhiji was not a mere Hindu social reformer and was not satisfied by merely questioning the practices of the Hindus. He also demonstrated the extent of injustices in the social practices and pointed out positive ways of living. It was this dedication to the cause of Harijans that prompted the Constituent Assembly to pay homage to Gandhiji and enshrine in the Constitution a provision to abolish untouchability. To Gandhiji, the practice of untouchability (i.e., keeping a section of humanity as not worth interacting with just because of their birth in a particular class of family), was violence. Oppression of any form, he considered it as violent, and liberation of the oppressed group as non-violent, provided such liberation is undertaken by noble means.
Gandhiji was interested not only in social institutions and removal of untouchability but also in economic institutions. His concepts of aparigraha, daridranarayan, ‘trusteeship’, swadeshi, ‘decentralisation’, ‘dignity of labour’, and, above all, his ideas of ‘spinning wheel economy’ are worth considering. He preferred a simple economy with everyone working and earning his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. If capitalistic large scale production was inevitable, he would allow it provided the accumulation of wealth was done by non-violent means, for the sake of the poor. So, in both the institutions of caste and property, Gandhiji tried to introduce greater egalitarian values. The socially down-trodden castes were also materially poor.

Sense of Social Justice

There are great spheres in national life where the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi continue to shape national policy. The most important of these is the burning sense of social justice, which he brought into national life and which showed itself most prominently in his identification with the Harijans in India. Nothing moved him so much as the inhumanity with which Hinduism had treated the depressed classes throughout the history.

His Approach

His approach to the problem of scheduled castes was not of a social reformer but that of a humble pentent, who identified himself with the oppressed. He lived by preference in Harijan colonies even after the advent of freedom which shows his intense sense of oneness with them. To him, even the highest honour in the nation was nothing except the problems confronting the poor, down-trodden peasants, workers and scheduled castes in India. This revolt against a crying injustice was, perhaps, the most important aspect of his political life and some of it he has been able to transmit not only to his followers but also the people of India as a whole.

It was in 1920 that Mahatma Gandhi entered the political horizon of India, and the void perhaps left by the death of Lokmanya Tilak gave him the leadership of the Congress. In this year there started a new phase in the Congress attitude towards the untouchables. “Gandhi is unique”, says Francis Nielson in his significant book, *The Tragedy of Europe*. “There is no record of a man of his position challenging a great empire. A Diogenes in action, a Saint Francis in humility, a Socrates in wisdom, he revealed to the world the utter paltriness of the methods of the statesman who relies upon force to gain his end . . .”

“In this context, spiritual integrity triumphs over the physical opposition of the forces of the State.”

A French philosopher once said that “no man is strong unless he
bears within his character antitheses strongly marked” which was one of the secrets of Mahatma Gandhi’s strength from within.

The removal of untouchability was an indispensable part of his Constructive programme. In Gujarat, and wherever he went and wherever he spoke, he poured ridicule on his ‘leprosy of Hinduism’ as he once termed untouchability. He always proposed a referendum on the subject.

**Vaikom Satyagraha**

Vaikom is a small village in the north of the former Travancore-Cochin State. The temple of Lord Shiva for which Satyagraha was offered is the oldest. The depressed classes constituted 17 lakhs out of 40 lakhs in the State. The Nayadis were the most depressed. Their mere sight was a pollution for the *Savarna* Hindus. These people had to shout from a distance ‘keep away’. Gandhiji came here and stood as a prophet to these people and accepted the challenge of orthodoxy. He addressed a vast meeting:

“I have come here for a simple human demand that the way leading towards the temple should be opened for all. My ideas on untouchability are known everywhere. I am not concerned about the destruction of *varna-ashrama* dharma. I have not conceived inter-dining and inter-marriages. But what I want is that in a cultured society there should be good relationship between man and man. Those temples, which are open for all, should be opened for all Hindus”.

**His Work for their Emancipation**

As already pointed out, Mahatma Gandhi had so many problems in hand and was applying his unerring instinct to solve each of them. It was purely a religious question for him. He stood on the platform of country’s interest and, therefore, he wanted this evil to go by gradual process and by appeal to the conscience of the Hindus. “To Gandhiji religion was the breath of life and while he wanted to modify Hinduism, he, on the whole, defended it”.

“India”, Jawaharlal Nehru said, “contains all that is disgusting and all that is noble.” “Nothing it contains is more disgusting than the hideous system,” as Mahatma Gandhi called it to untouchability, “the canker eating at the vitals of Hinduism”. Orthodox Hindus did not share this view, nor did they welcome Gandhiji’s efforts to extricate the evil. Mahatma Gandhi said:

“If I discovered that those scriptures, which are known as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the *Bhagwatgita*, the *Smritis*, etc., clearly showed that they claimed divine authority for untouchability, then nothing on this earth would hold me to Hinduism. I should throw it overboard as I should throw overboard a rotten apple.” His religion was a religion of
freedom and growth, not of bondage to tradition and authority, of stagnation and decay. Gandhiji's Hinduism is the Hinduism of old in all its pristine purity, reborn and practised under modern conditions. He went to the extent of saying, "if Hindu-Muslim unity was to be established, untouchability in every form must go, and Hindus must be prepared to embrace Muslims as their own blood brothers".

In attempting to eradicate untouchability, Mahatma Gandhi was cutting the roots of several thousands years old. Untouchability is segregation gone mad. Theoretically a device against contamination, it actually contaminates the country that allows it. Mahatma Gandhi knew this and he fought untouchability for the sake of the castes as well as the outcastes, but in fighting it he defied a thousand taboos and roused a million fears, superstitions, hate and vested interests. Buddhism and many Hindu reformers had attacked untouchability; Gandhi said little against it until he had taken action against it.

Mahatma Gandhi, therefore, was neither a revolutionary social reformer nor a rebel against the existing Chaturvarna dharma, which prescribes the four divisions of the Hindus. He had the mind of a politician and a statesman but the heart of a saint to whom inequality was a sin but he himself called the untouchables 'Harijans' or the 'Children of God'. He hated the system based on injustice and tyranny of a few over millions. Addressing a meeting in Godhra (Gujarat) on 2 January 1925, he said, "I have been to three places in the locality of untouchables. I saw there animals and not men. If we are not responsible for their pitiable lot, then who else is? For me Swarajya is absolutely nothing in comparison to service for these people... I have no hesitation in saying that wherever there is a school for untouchables, wherever there are ashrams for untouchables, it is pilgrimage place."

An All-India Movement

As back as 1920, the Congress, under the leadership of Gandhiji, adopted a distinctly political resolution for the admission of depressed classes to Hindu temples. The decision to take up the cause of untouchability gained added strength in 1922 when Gandhiji, after the civil disobedience movement, gave the country the Bardoli programme, in which the first item was the removal of untouchability. Immediately after the Poona Pact, he embarked upon an anti-untouchability campaign. In 1934, he undertook the great anti-untouchability tour. In the words of Muriel Lester, "For months we went from place to place. He held seven open-air meetings in one day. After the long speeches, there would be a gift collection, then a long queue of people bringing gifts, often taking off their jewellery to offer him; then he became an auctioneer; nothing was too insignificant to have his attention, and to fetch its price."
Untouchability not Part of Hinduism

The psychology of Mahatma Gandhi, ushering an all-India programme for the unliftment of the depressed classes, must be understood. He was the undisputed master and leader of the all-India Congress organisation, when he thought of the untouchables. He also took into consideration the pulse of the vast multitude of Hindus, who were Congressmen. Therefore, the cause of freedom was uppermost in his mind and the cause of untouchables a secondary issue. He never wished to embark upon a revolutionary programme for the untouchables for that would have hurt the sentiments of Caste Hindus, resulting in cracks in the Congress.

When he made the removal of untouchability an integral part of the constructive programme of Congress, he expressly defined his aim to exclude inter-dining and thus had parted the company with those who had taken up the social reform movement. But he always abhorred untouchability and said that untouchability was not a part of Hinduism. He said: "I believed that untouchability was not a part of Hinduism; and that, if it was, such Hinduism was not for me. True, Hinduism does not regard untouchability as a sin. I do not want to enter into any controversy regarding the interpretation of the Shastras. It might be difficult for me to establish my point by quoting authorities from the Bhagavata or the Manusmriti. But I claim to have understood the spirit of Hinduism. Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability. It has degraded us, made us the Pariahs of the Empire." But Gandhiiji did not plunge into the social revolution and, therefore, reduced its value and importance. "In fact, Mahatma's limited programme in this respect seemed to show excessive consideration for the irrational prejudices of caste Hindus". But he had shared a goodly section of the Hindu society into shedding practices such as untouchability, child marriage and the degradation of women, but the realities must have realised that he had only broken the crust of the immortal custom and the hard core of orthodox traditional Hinduism. Even the untouchables, whom he had befriended and championed in the face of obloquy and attack had not always regarded him as their friend. The more politically conscious among them had questioned his motives, and their leader, Dr. Ambedkar, continued to denounce him as a social reformer actuated by political consideration. But little did Dr. Ambedkar realise the importance of the spell of Mahatma Gandhi over the nation.

Exhorting the untouchables to rise above the occasion and lead a clean and healthy life, he said, "Don't accept jhoota (dirty food) to remain clean. Don't accept decayed food, discard the jhoota sweet even if it is given and eat the bread cooked yourself. You are not born to eat jhoota. You have eyes, ears and noses, you are all men. Keep manliness up." While asking the Kshatriyas to own them and not to
harass them, he said, "The meaning of Kshatriya is to protect cow and Brahmin. The meaning of cow is not a two-horned animal but it means an afflicted and sorrowful animal. The antyajas (untouchables) are sorrowful. If the Kshatriyas would forsake, then they will not remain Kshatriyas."

Mahatma Gandhi always insisted on the theory of persuasion rather than revolution. It was undoubtedly a flattering approach to the reactionaries particularly when a great section of Congress workers was organising mass meeting against inter-dining and anti-touchability movement by Gandhiji. In 1929, the Congress Working Committee appointed a sub-committee with Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Seth Jamnalal Bajaj to intensify the campaign. It is heartening to note that with Jamnalal Bajaj's active work, a number of temples were thrown open to untouchables. But with the Congress drifting towards anti-Simon agitation, the work for untouchability was held up.

What led Him to Pick up Their Cause?
Mahatma Gandhi had many of the indentured labourers in South Africa. His struggle in South Africa was for the emancipation of the black from the whites. It was here that he learnt that all men are born equal and must enjoy equal rights, and society owes them an equal or at least unimpeded opportunity to develop their native abilities and live in liberty. It was, therefore, quite natural for a crusader from Africa to book untouchability as a great blot on the Hindus. He often said, "I have defended varnashrama dharma, but Brahminism that can tolerate untouchability, virgin widowhood, speculation of virgins, stinks my nostrils". He again said, "The moment we have restored real living equality between man and man, we shall be able to establish equality between man and the whole creation".

Untouchability and the Vedas
On being asked whether sins of touch and sight were of Vedic origin, he said that it was not so. "I would however add, that no matter which is credited with the Vedic origin, if it is repugnant to the moral sense, it must be summarily rejected as contrary to the spirit of the Vedas, and perhaps, what is more, as contrary to fundamental ethics".

Untouchability was to him the sin of Hindus. He said, "The Hindus must suffer for it; they must purify themselves; they must pay the debt they use to their suppressed brothers and sisters. There is the shame and theirs must be the glory when they have purged themselves on the black sin".

The simplest explanation of Gandhiji's attitude towards untouchability is that he just could not stand it. In fact, he loathed this, 'inhuman boycott of human beings' so much that he said: "If it was
proved to me that it is an essential part of Hinduism, I, for one, would declare myself as open rebel against Hinduism itself". No man who cared more for popularity than principle would have made such a public statement in a country overwhelmingly and conservatively Hindu. He said, "Socially, they (the untouchables) are lepers; economically they are then slaves. Religiously they are denied the entrance to place we mis-call 'houses of God'. They are denied the use, on the same terms as the caste Hindus, of the public road, public schools and the like... The wonder is that they are not able to eke out an existence, or that they still remain within the Hindu fold. They are too down-trodden to rise against their suppressors". But he made it as a Hindu in an effort to purify his religion. He regarded untouchability as an 'excruciation of perversion of Hinduism': He had this to say when fraternising the Harijans. It is necessary for us Hindus to repent the wrong we have done to alter our behaviour towards those whom we have 'suppressed' by a system as devilish as we believe the English system of the Government of India to be. We must return to them inheritance of which we have robbed them. And this must not be true of a few English-knowing reformers merely, but it must be a conscious voluntary effort on the part of the masses. We may not wait till eternity for this much-belated reform of grace, probation, preparation and tapasya. It is a reform not to follow Swaraj but to precede it."

Can Untouchability be Removed by Force?

Mahatma Gandhi believed in what he termed as "Manav Dharma". Addressing an untouchability conference at Belgaum, he said: "I do not regard inter-dining and inter-marriage as essential to the removal of untouchability. I cannot recommend wholesale abolition of these restrictions to the public, even at the risk of being charged with hypocrisy and inconsistency. The only way by which you and I can wean orthodox Hindus from their bigotry is by patient argument and correct conduct. So long as they are not converted, I can only ask you to put up with your lot with patience. I am willing to stand by you and share your sufferings with you. You must have the right of worship in any temple in which members of other castes are admitted. You must have admission to schools along with the children of other castes without any distinction. You must be eligible to the highest office in the land not excluding even that of Viceroy's. That is the definition of the removal of untouchability. But I can help you in this only by following the way indicated by my religion and not by following Western methods. Can one serve a sacred cause by adopting Satan's methods? I pray to you, therefore, to dismiss from your mind the idea of ameliorating your condition by brute force". The main principle behind Mahatma Gandhi in all his approaches was "evil cannot be overcome by evil, hatred cannot
be extinguished by hatred". "Civilization", once he said, "is the conquest of one's mind and passions. We can conquer an enemy without hating him... and moral force is greater than navies". So much engrossed was he in the problems of these classes that he conducted his Harijan campaign from Yervada prison. "In prison, he very severely restricted the discussion to the Harijan question and if anybody, however exalted, ventured to stray from it ever so little, he pulled him up at once, politely but firmly". Addressing a conference at Bhadran on 11 February 1925, he said, "I want you to touch the untouchables because they deserve it, because they serve the society just as a mother serves the child; to call them untouchables is equal to losing humanity. India has become untouchable in the world because she has treated many crores of people as untouchables".

Mahatma Gandhi was a politician, leader, statesman, spiritual and religious guide, all rolled into one. "Though he appeared as a dynamic force, he was not too revolutionary for the majority of his countrymen. If he had been so, he would have frightened them, instead of inspiring them, repelled them; instead of drawing them, his policy was one of unification". "If the concept of sin as an instrument of change in fraught with dangers in matters like caste and outcaste, it is even more to be dreaded in domestic relations. All this left considerable doubt as to whether society reformed along with his ideas would be an improvement even if it was practicable."

It was after the Round Table Conference that the problem of untouchability assumed a world-wide concern. But now the depressed classes were a force in the Indian politics. Hence Mahatma Gandhi, after the Poona Pact, made concerted and consecutive efforts to win over the untouchables and Dr. Ambedkar. The latter also accepted the challenge and both the personalities strove hard to tackle the problem from thier viewpoint. "The inhuman institution of untouchability created a revolt by those who suffered from inequalities. The conscience of the Hindus was challenged by Dr. Ambedkar who put the untouchables on the political and social map of India, while the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi weakened the defence of Hindu orthodoxy.

It cannot be denied that the personality and stature of Gandhi was greatly instrumental in appealing to the people of India of which he was an unquestionable leader for ameliorating the lot of the Harijan, "the children of God". He wielded his powers to rouse the nation's sympathy for them. Although Gandhi tried to reduce the opposition of reactionary and orthodox Hindus towards the depressed classes, Dr. Ambedkar's fierce attack on the Congress incensed, as S. Natarajan puts it: "But the other result was that it roused the antagonism of a section of depressed classes, who feared that it would result in political annihilation. But Dr. Ambedkar's sustained scepticism about Hindu intentions served to
maintain active interest in the depressed classes.” It can be said that Gandhi stirred the Savarna Hindus to shame and won tremendous sympathy for these classes. So writes H.N. Brailsford:

“The campaign of this mystic, who cleaned latrines one day and opened temples next, is one of the strongest chapters in history and one of the noblest. Has any saint in human memory done more to lighten the misery of the oppressed and restore their self-respect? India honours Gandhiji to day chiefly because he led the fight for independence. Humanity owes him an even heavier debt because he opened the road of untouchables to freedom.”

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar

The difference between them was real and profound. We come across many interesting examples of such personalities in the history of modern India. The later half of nineteenth century produced great savants, philosophers, social reformers, thinkers, and statesmen in India. Their ideas influenced countless people not only in India but also all over the world. Their work and contribution stirred the imagination of the people. Tilak and Gokhale, Ranade, Agarkar, and Mahatma Phule, Keshab Chandra Sen and Debendranath Tagore present such contrasts and yet their mission was common, viz. the emancipation of man and the country. But then followed different methods. such was the difference between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar. Both stood against social evils. Both wanted to reform a corrupt society. But their line of action was different. One was a social revolutionary and the other was only an evolutionary. One wanted to reform the existing institutions of Hindu society, the other wanted to create new order based on the concept of justice and equality of all men. To Dr. Ambedkar, the institution of untouchability was a sin and was to be destroyed the sooner the better, and, therefore, the Chaturvarna system must go, and Hindu society must have a platform shorn of all inequalities. To Gandhi, it was a religious question. He upheld the Chaturvarna dharma and proposed gradual changes in it so that in the course of time Hindu hearts would be changed. Time has shown that the evil system of untouchability has still remained a canker in the body-politics of Hinduism. Gandhi extolled the virtues of Dr. Ambedkar and respected his mighty intellectual personality but disliked policy and line of action. On the other hand, Dr. Ambedkar, too, eulogised Gandhi’s great work and services for the depressed classes, but he always opposed him tooth and nail, saying: “Mahatmas, like fleeting fantoms, raise dust but not the level”. He had great hatred towards ludicrous social reformers when he said: “Saints and reformers have come and gone but untouchability as remained as it is”. In a world, Dr. Ambedkar was, as Nehru puts it, a “mighty symbol of revolt” and wanted a complete and revolutionary
transformation of Hindu society. Gandhi, whose mighty, personality bestrode the country like a colossus, preferred peaceful non-violent changes in Hindu society. Where Mahatma Gandhi was the spiritual leader of the down-trodden, Dr. Ambedkar was born among them and was, therefore, a natural leader of the depressed classes. To Gandhi, the country's independence meant the first and foremost objective; to Dr. Ambedkar, social democracy was a first requisite to precede political democracy. Gandhi preferred Harijan bastis to the glittering Viceregal House. He could have had what he wanted as others in different parts of the world have had like Presidents Nasser, Tito, Nkrumah, Sukarno, etc. If India became free politically, she was to be freedom from castism, linguism, and economic chaos. He was the greatest single influence in the world, who achieved miracles by love and sufferings. While Dr. Ambedkar stood mostly for oppressed and depressed classes and the regeneration of the Hindu society, Gandhi stood for the whole nation, nay for the humanity at large.

Round Table Conference: Gandhi-Ambedkar Controversy

The convening of a Round Table Conference in London was indeed a great event in the history of both India and England, but to the untouchables in particular it was a turning point in their history. It was for the first time that their claims were being considered along with other right to be consulted in the framing of the constitution of India.

Dr. Ambedkar: 'On the Future of Depressed Classes'—Indian Constitution

Speaking with an authority of a leader, he summarized the minority problems vis-a-vis the depressed classes. To quote him, "that although there are various minority communities in India, which require political recognition, it has to be understood that the minorities are not on same plank, and that they differ from each other. They differ in social understanding with each minority held the view vis-a-vis the majority community. We have, for instance, the Parsee community, which is the smallest community in India, yet vis-a-vis its social understanding with the majority community, it is probably the highest in order to precedence."

Minorities Next to Muslims

"On the other hand, if you take depressed classes, they are a minority, which comes next to the great Muslim minority in India, and yet their social standard is lower than the social standard of ordinary human beings.

"Again, if you take the minorities and classify them on the basis of social and political rights, you will find that there are certain minorities, which are in the enjoyment of social and political rights, and the fact that they are in a minority does not necessarily stand in the way of their full
and free enjoyment of these civic rights. But if you take the case of the depressed classes, the position is totally different. They have in certain matters no rights, and where they have any, the majority community will not permit them to enjoy them.

"My first submission to this Committee, then, is that it should realize that although, to use an illustration, the minorities are all in the same boat, yet the most important fact to remember is that they are not all in the same class in the same boat; some are travelling in 'A' class, some in 'B' class and some in 'C' class and so on. I have not the slightest doubt in the mind that the depressed classes, though they are a minority and are to that extent in the same boat as other minorities, are not even in 'C' or 'D' class but are actually in the hold.

"The depressed classes, along with the other minorities, fear that under any future Constitution of India by which majority rule will be established and there can be no shadow of doubt that the majority rule will be the rule of the orthodox Hindus—there is great danger of the majority with its orthodox Hindu beliefs and prejudices contravening the dictates of justice, equality and good conscience; there is a great danger that the minorities may be discriminated against either in legislation or administration or in the other public rights of citizenship, and, therefore, it is necessary to safeguard the position of the minorities in such a manner that the discrimination which is feared shall not take place.

"From that point of view, however, what is asked is that the minorities shall have representation in the legislatures and the executives, that they shall have representation in the public service of the country, and that the Constitution shall provide that there shall be imposed on the future legislatives of India, both Central and Provincial, certain limitations on their legislative power, which will prevent the majorities from abusing their legislative power in such a manner as to enact laws which would create discrimination between one citizen and another. I say these circumstances—this danger of discrimination—are common to all minorities, and, I, as a representative of the depressed classes, join with the demand which they (other minorities) have made in this regard." He made a detailed statement vis-a-vis the social disabilities and economic hardships suffered by the depressed classes. He cited a report of a committee appointed by the Government of Bombay, which said:

"Although we have recommended various remedies to secure to the depressed classes their rights to all public utilities, we fear that there will be difficulties in the way of their exercising them for a long time to come. The first difficulty is the fear of open violence against them by the orthodox classes. It must be noted that the depressed classes form a small minority in every village, opposed to which is a great majority of the orthodox who are bent on protecting their interests and dignity from
any supposed invasion by the depressed classes at any cost. The danger of prosecution by the police has put a limitation upon the use of violence by the orthodox classes and consequently such cases are rare."

On their economic position, he said: "The second difficulty arises from the economic position in which the depressed classes are found today. The depressed classes have no economic independence in most parts of the Presidency. Some cultivate the lands of the orthodox classes as their tenants-at-will, others live on their earnings as farm labourers employed by the orthodox classes and the rest subsist on the food or grain given to them by the orthodox classes in lieu of service rendered to them as village servants. We have heard of numerous instances where the orthodox classes have used their economic power as a weapon against those depressed classes in their villages, when the latter have dared to exercise their rights, and have evicted them from their lands, and stopped their employment and discontinued their remuneration as village servants. This boycott is often planned on such an extensive scale as to include the prevention of the depressed classes from using the commonly used paths and the stoppage of the sale of the necessities of life by the village banya. According to the evidence, sometimes small causes suffice for the proclamation of a social boycott against the depressed classes, their rights to use of common well, but cases have been, by no means rare, where a stringent boycott has been proclaimed simply because a depressed class man has put on the sacred thread, has bought a piece of land, has put on good clothes or ornaments, or has carried a marriage procession with the bridegroom on the horse through the public street.

"We do not know of any weapon more effective than this social boycott which could have been invented for the suppression of the depressed classes. The method of open violence pales away before it for it has the most far-reaching and deadening effects. It is more dangerous because it passes as a lawful method consistent with the theory of freedom of contact. We agree that this tyranny of the majority must be put down with a firm hand, if we are to guarantee the depressed classes freedom of speech, and action necessary for their uplift."

**Political Representation in Legislatures**

A third thing, which he reminded the assembly about the depressed classes, was the fear among them. That whatever representation they may be granted in the new legislatures, they will always be in a very small minority, and consequently having regard to the apathetic attitude of the orthodox classes towards them, there was always the danger of their interests being neglected altogether.

As against these special circumstances, which affect the depressed classes, he proposed the following safeguards:

"First of all, we want a fundamental right enacted in the Constitu-
tion, which will declare 'untouchability' to be illegal for all public purposes. We must be emancipated, so as to say, from this social curse before we can at all consent to enter into the Constitution, and secondly, this fundamental right must also invalidate and nullify all such disabilities and all such discriminations as may have been made hitherto. Next, we want legislation against the social persecution to which I have drawn your attention just now, and for this we have provided in the document, which we have submitted by certain clauses which are based upon an act which now prevails in Burma. Then what we want is this that the liability of the executive officers of the Crown for acts of tyranny or oppression shall be made effective. Today, under Sections 110 and 111 of the Government of India Act, that liability is not real. And lastly, what we want is a right to appeal against acts of neglect or prejudice to the Central Government and failing that to the Secretary of State and a Special Department into the Government of India to take charge of our welfare."

After making a case for their political safeguards, he said, "That this whole question of minority representation is really the crux of the whole situation, and if the majority community desires that all minorities should associate with them in having or in claiming a Constitution, which will give India what they call Dominion Status, or what we prefer to call government by the people, for the people and in the name of the people, then I am afraid that the majority of the community must see to it that all fears of the minorities are set at rest. Otherwise, it may not be possible for us to take what I do not conceal from myself in the risk that most of us are taking in claiming Dominion Status."

"The Committee unanimously accepted the principle that the new Constitution should contain provisions designed to assure the depressed class communities that their interests would be prejudiced."

**Communal Award: Depressed Classes—Their Safeguards**

The most important part of the Award, namely that relating to the depressed classes, ran as follows:

"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 the means alone, to secure adequate representation in the legislatures, a number of special seats will be assigned to them as shown in the table. These 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 those 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."

This Award, also known as 'Macdonald Award', was a singular victory for Dr. Ambedkar and recognition of the fact that the depressed classes shall have to be taken into confidence, for a future set-up or constitution of India and in future their existence cannot be ignored by the politicians in the country. To quote Ramsay Macdonald, "We felt it our duty to safeguard what we believed to be the right of the depressed classes to a fair proportion of representation in the legislature; we were equally careful to do nothing that would split off their community from the Hindu world".

Aftermath of the Award: Question of Depressed Classes becomes National Issue

To Mahatma Gandhi, the Award was a great shock. "A life-long champion of the outcastes, he had always regarded them as an integral part of the Hindu community and had pinned his hopes for their advancement not on division and antagonism between them and caste-Hindus but on awakening in the latter a sense of social justice and duty." He was in Yervada Jail. He had not given up his fight for tying the untouchable Hindu to the caste-Hindus in politics. On 11 March 1932, he informed the British Cabinet from the Yervada Jail that he would resist with his life the separation of untouchable Hindus from the caste-Hindus. And when the Communal Award was announced, granting separate electorates to the depressed classes, he declared his resolve to fast unto death if the separate electorates for the depressed classes were not abolished.

Gandhiji's Fast

Gandhiji undertook a fast unto death against the Award. The whole country was shaken and plunged into anxiety. Sir Rustom Masani, replaying to those who attributed motives of his fast as 'Political blackmail', said, "None knows the weight of another's burden. None at any rate would hazard an estimate of the burden of the man who, atlas-like carries the weight of a vast sub-continent on his feeble shoulders. Yet some wise people have come forward to belittle the grievance under the oppressive burden of which the soul of Mahatma Gandhi is groaning. All that we need tell them is: 'Tread not on thorns, yet barefooted people'. He was, in fact, a good shepherded who was always out to seek and save the wounded, down-trodden, homeless and oppressed. Even the Mahatma's reply to such charges was that it was directed not against his opponents, but against his friends". It is intended to sting the Hindu conscience into right religious actions. "Fasting", he explained, "stirs up sluggish conscience and fires living hearts to action. Those who have to bring about radical changes in human
conditions and surroundings cannot do it except by raising ferment in the society. There are only two methods of doing this violence and non-violence. Non-violent pressure exerted through self-suffering by fasting . . . touches and strengthens the moral fibres of those against whom it is directed.

The Government of India offered to release him under certain conditions but Mahatmai declined conditional release. To Dr. Rajendra Prasad, it appeared that Hindustan was on its trial: It is indeed a sad commentary and I write it with my conviction that the entire Hindu population went into confusion and anxious moments not because they felt guilty of the atrocities they have been committing on the poor scheduled castes in India since ages but by a single predominant, factor that Mahatmai's life was in danger. But it is indeed true that the verdict of history was now on their side. Let us recall here that Dr. Ambedkar had to say at this crucial hour. He issued a statement to the press:

"So far as I am concerned, I am willing to consider everything, though I am not willing to allow the rights of the depressed classes to be curtailed in any way. It is no use holding a conference in a vacuum or discussing things without any specific data."

Dr. Ambedkar issued another statement worth to be quoted here:

"It would have been justifiable, if Mr. Gandhi had resorted to this extreme step for obtaining independence for the country on which he was so insistent all through the Round Table Conference debates. Separate electorates are granted not only to the depressed classes but to the Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans as well as to Mohammedans and the Sikhs. If the separate electorates to the Sikhs and Mohammedans did split up the nation, the Hindu society could not be said to be split up if the depressed classes were given separate electorates . . . The Mahatma is not an immortal person, nor the Congress, assuming that it is not malevolent and is not to have an abiding existence. There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the depressed classes, but everyone of them has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone. But the untouchables have remained as untouchables."

Dr. Ambedkar went to see Mahatma Gandhi to find a solution. The emphasis was on saving the life of the Mahatma and Dr. Ambedkar was sobered to a great extent on this point. Ultimately, an historic agreement known as Poona Pact was reached on 24 September 1932. In this Pact Dr. Ambedkar signed on behalf of the depressed classes and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya on behalf of the caste-Hindus. The other signatories were Dr. M.R. Jayakar, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, G.D. Birla, C. Rajagopalachari, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Rao Bahadur Srinivasan, M.C. Rajah, Devdas Gandhi, Biswas, Rajbhoj, P. Baloo, Gavai,
Thakkar, Solanki, G.C. Mehta, Bakhle and Kamat. More signatories were added to the list later on. Rajaji was so happy that he exchanged his fountain pen with Dr. Ambedkar, Gurudeo Tagore also reached Poona at this time on hearing the news of agreement; he sang a song.

Dr. Ambedkar was given a thunderous applause when he rose to speak at a meeting in the Indian Merchants' Chamber Hall: "My only regret", said Dr. Ambedkar, "Why did not Mahatmaji take this attitude at the Round Table Conference? If he had shown the same consideration to my point of view, it would not have been necessary for him to go through this ordeal."

Poona Pact, 25 October 1932

1. There shall be seats reserved for the depressed classes out of the general electorate seats in the provincial legislatures 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. These figures are based on the total strength of the Provincial Councils announced in the Prime Minister's decision.

2. Elections to these shall be by joint electorates subject however, to the following procedure:

   All the members of the depressed classes registered in the general 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 a single vote: the four persons, getting the highest number of votes in such primary election, shall be candidates for election by the general electorate.

3. Representation of the depressed classes in the Central Legislature shall like-wise be on the principle of joint electorate and reserved seats by the method of primary election in the manner provided for in the Clause 2 above for their representation in the Provincial Legislatures.

4. In the Central Legislature, 18 per cent of the seats allotted to general electorate of British India in the said legislature shall be reserved for the depressed classes.

5. The system of primary election to a panel of candidates for election to the Central and Provincial Legislatures, as here into fore mentioned, shall come to an end after the first ten years, unless terminated sooner by mutual agreement under the provision of Clause 6 above.

6. The system of representation of the depressed classes by reserved seats in the Provincial and Central Legislatures, as provided for in Clauses 1 and 4, shall continue until determined by mutual agreement between the communities concerned in the settlement.

7. Franchise for the Central and Provincial Legislature for the depressed classes shall be as indicated in the Lothian Committee Report.

8. There shall 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 shall be made to secure fair representation for the depressed
classes in these respects, subject to such educational qualifications as may
be laid down for appointment to the public services.

9. In every province, out of the educational grant, an adequate sum
shall be earmarked for providing educational facilities to the members
of the depressed classes.

Needless to say, Gandhi-Ambedkar controversy and the Poona Pact
unleashed a country-wide campaign for the eradication of untouchability
in India. It was the end of an epoch, which forgot to take into cogniz-
ance the lot of the depressed classes. But it was the beginning of an
epoch, which witnessed tremendous consciousness and awakening in
them.

The British Policy of Divide and Rule

During our freedom struggle, the British Government was face to
face with the rise and spread of national movement. With the entry of
Mahatma Gandhi, the entire era of the struggle got a “new look”. The
year 1937 saw the Congress entering the legislatures and assuming
responsibilities in the various States. It was the aim of the British rulers
to ‘divide and rule’. With this imperial intention, they were out to
thwart any sanguine move of the Congress. The problem of Muslim
representation and other minorities was looming large over the political
horizon. The question of the depressed classes also assumed importance.
The role which Dr. Ambedkar played during the Round Table Conference
has already been described earlier. He had already made out a case for
the depressed classes in India. Despite the rhetoric outbursts and
tactical differences, their goal was the same—the independence of the
country—the emancipation of the millions of the down-trodden but the
British rulers wanted to take the wind out of the sails of the Congress
by repeatedly telling the word that there was no unit of approach in
the different political parties in India; hence the question of freedom
for India was always ignored. The extracts given here would give us an
insight into the mind of the British rulers.

Fortunately we have now INDIA—THE TRANSFER OF POWER
1942-47 volumes published by Her Majesty’s Government Great Britain,
depicting the constitutional relations between Britain and India during
the most crucial phase of the history of our freedom movement. India
Office records on the Transfer of Power and the events leading up to it
are there to help understand the mind of rulers and the leaders of our
movements. There were many riddles, which now stand solved on the
issue of depressed classes, the intention of the British rulers was to get
them on their side and as far as possible thwart and divide the freedom
struggle launched by the Indian National Congress. A few extracts are given below:

"Minor minorities such as Scheduled Castes, and a large body of opinion which is anxious to arrest but knows that it can in no circumstances hope to exercise real control itself over the political future is watching the line we shall take with uneasiness and uncertainty."

"We have also to consider our duty towards 30 to 40 million untouchables and our treaties with the princely States of India, perhaps 80 million. Naturally, we do not want to throw India into chaos on the eve of invasion." (Transfer of Power, Vol. I, pp. 309-310).

Mr. Amery to the Marquess of Linlithgow
Telegram 1/PO/6/106 b. ff. 5253

India Office
11 March 1942

... In August 1940, a full statement was made about the aim and policy we are pursuing in India. This amounted in short to a promise that as soon as possible after the war we should confer upon India Dominion Status as expressed in the Statute of Westminster, provided that the various Indian communities could agree upon themselves upon the constitution and the Gt. Britain was honourably cleared of its obligations to minorities, to the Indian princes to whom we are bound by Treaty, and to the Depressed Classes together with certain minor matters incidental to our long association with the fortunes of Indian sub-continent." (Transfer of Power, Vol. I, p. 406).

Mr. Churchill to the Marquess of Linlithgow
(Via India Office) Telegram 1/PC/6/1066: F. 421

16 February, 1942

Immediate
Secret

received 17th February.

7. Kt. Following From Prime Minister

"I am greatly obliged to you for your telegram. You may be sure every aspect will be most carefully considered. My own idea was to ask the different communities of India—Hindus, Muslims, Sikh, untouchables, etc., to give us three best and leading men for such a body as has been outlined. However, the electoral bases proposed, which was the best we could think of here, might have the effect of throwing the whole council into the hands of the Congress caucus. This is far from my wish."

It is clear from these extracts that the British rulers were out and out to wear away depressed classes from the national mainstream.
Depressed Classes League

Besides the All India Harijan Sevak Sangh, a new organisation with its absolute loyalties to the Congress sprang up. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, a new figure hailing from the depressed classes took his plunge in public life and started as a social worker and assist the poor down-trodden of Bihar. This figure was Babu Jagjiwan Ram. Mahatma Gandhi was already convinced that untouchability and caste prejudices were cancerous growth and destroying the vitals of the Hindu society that no political and economic progress was possible unless these shackles were removed and that unless, Babuji, as he is fondly called, joined the national mainstream of the struggle. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya gave him a known touch and brought him to Varanasi to probe his higher education at the Banaras Hindu University. He organised Ravidas Sabha in Bihar and kindled a new awakening among the chamars (depressed caste) of Bihar. By 1937, he was the undisputed leader of the Harijans in Bihar. He made them realise their legitimate place in Hindu society, by infusing confidence in these for manhood and human dignity. He was opposed to Dr. Ambedkar's thesis for separate electorates for the Harijans. The birth of the 'Depressed Classes League was thus the result. He was blessed by Mahatma Gandhi. He had become the President of the League for ten years. He had played a laudable role for the uplift of the Harijans, socially disabled and the down-trodden. He has remained a staunch follower of Gandhi and Congress and also played a notable part in the peaceful non-violent revolution for the attainment of the freedom of India. The Depressed Classes League was the only forum which brought him into national arena. In the 1946 elections, the Congress secured an overwhelming majority of the general seats, the Muslim League having won the majority of the Muslim constituencies. The all-India Depressed Classes League went to the polls on its own (of course with the backing and blessings of the Congress) and practically won all the reserved seats for the depressed classes and Dr. Ambedkar and his party was outmanoeuvred.

The first general elections held in 1951-52 provided the opportunity to test the hold of Harijans. Out of 550 State Assembly seats contested by the Scheduled Castes Federation (Dr. Ambedkar's party), only 16 seats were won by it. Even Dr. Ambedkar was defeated in the Parliamentary election from Bombay by a Depressed Class League leader N.S. Kajrolkar (Congress nominee).

It is not the purpose of this study to discuss the politics of the depressed classes vis-a-vis separate electorates and the stand taken by Dr. Ambedkar but the number of forces at work and their contribution was all towards a common ideal i.e. the emancipation of the down-trodden. But after the death of Dr. Ambedkar, the militant mass organisation built by him witnessed the deluge. In 1966, Prof. R.D. Bhandare, a
leader and founder member of the Republican Party of India joined the Congress. Others have also followed suit, like B.P. Maurya, D.T. Rapavate, Prof. M.N. Kamble and a host of others have joined the Congress during 60's to strengthen the forces of secularism, socialism and parliamentary democracy. Whatever has been left behind in the Republican Party of India does not hold any noticeable strength all over India. But the depressed castes have an implicit faith in Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy.


The founding fathers of the Indian National Congress were anxious to usher in India an ideal society. Our late beloved Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote:

"In the context of society today, the caste system and muchth at goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can be political democracy and much less economic democracy. Between these two concessions conflicts is inherent and only one of them can survive."

Therefore the creation of an ideal homogeneous Indian society was their dream and the same ideal has been enshrined in our Constitution. The inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi, the human kindly touch of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the wisdom of our founding fathers found these noblest expressions in the Indian Constitution.

Little has so far been written on the socio-economic consequences of the Constitution on the Indian society. It is socio-economic progress in general that brings about a real egalitarian order in this country—the provision of a decent life not for a few but for the teeming million. This Constitution has been put to the severest test during the last 33 years India has constantly marched towards this ideal. We have witnessed a tremendous socio-political awakening in the masses. The depressed classes have travelled from the position of servility to manhood. This Constitution is essentially a revolutionary social document, which embodies in it the urges and aspirations of the people of India. It also takes into consideration the historical, psychological, and cultural attitude, and values that determined and evolved in the Indian social structure. The provisions dealing with the Preamble of the Constitution, the Fundamental Rights, the Directive Principles, the special provisions for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the Schedules V and VI dealing with fair play and furthering the goal of social resolution. The cardinal principles and commitment to the ushering in of an equilatarian society lie in these provisions.

But no single all-powerful, short-cut recipe can be suggested for this purpose. The cult of untouchability and deep prejudices are often
intangible things like the spider’s web with their ramifications into the dark labyrinths and chambers of the human mind. The Congress with its total commitment to the ideal of social justice and also a historic national organisation can be fairly looked to finding a remedy at the national level. The modern state with this Constitution embrace every sphere of national and social tendencies.

The Directive Principles enshrined in the Constitution, as Dr. Ambedkar put it, are the “Instruments of Instructions given to the men in power and authority”. When the Indian Constitution under the able statesmanship of our founding fathers has already established Parliamentary Democracy both as a form and method of Government under Chapter XVI of the Constitution, it seeks to establish social justice. It also seeks to establish economic justice.

In the spirit of the Constitution of India many new programmes have been initiated, like the historic 20-point programme of our late beloved Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi so that Justice—social, economic and political—shall be secured to all the down-trodden people in India, particularly the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes in the national field.