



The (Im)possibility of Winning the Untouchables: Ambedkar, Gandhi, E. Kannan, and the Depressed Classes Movement in Colonial Malabar

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The present paper discusses the fundamental dynamics of provincial-national politics and the struggle of the Depressed Classes for equality and political freedom through the correspondence between BR Ambedkar and E. Kannan of Malabar. This article examines the efforts made by the Depressed Classes to maintain their autonomy in the face of societal prejudices based on caste, exploring the contributions made by the Oppressed Classes to the process of reshaping political discourse in India. This paper also aims to situate the Ambedkar-initiated Depressed Class movement, the local Depressed Class movements, and Congress interventions within the political context of Madras and Malabar, shaped by British colonialism. The most perceptive and intellectual insights on caste oppression, ideas of autonomous anti-caste movement, dynamics of political space, and emancipatory potentialities from Ambedkar and Kannan confront Gandhi and the Congress, while providing concepts and viewpoints about how India's Depressed Classes could forge ahead and become recognized as a political force. This study investigates the power of resistance, mostly against caste oppression, and investigates the omitted histories of the Depressed Classes to demonstrate how they were key participants of the struggle, given the specificities of their social and political settings. The purpose of this article is to bring Dalits from the peripheries of South Asian history to the fore as intellectual leaders whose work rewrites and shifts the ideas and struggles of contemporary India, instead of merely being seen as regional political actors.

Depressed Classes, Caste, Malabar, Kannan, Ambedkar

Introduction

Colonialism changed the pre-modern institutions of India, although its effects were uneven and diverse in various regions. Under colonialism, seemingly, there was also an emergence of conflicting views about community, nation, and nationalism (Aloysius 1998). While colonial Modernity fostered anti-colonial nationalism, it also allows for the articulation of many oppressed identities. Nationalism idealises and seeks to create a homogeneous 'national community' (Anderson 2006) as the only legitimate path to progress and modernity. The oppressed masses, on the other hand, engaged in social movements of 'self-help and collective action', especially because the 'imagined nation of equal citizens' was not meant to provide them with equality (Rudolph 2010). The concept of community, then, is opposite to the concept of nation, as it engages in the 'de-imagining (of) nation' (Reghu 2010). So, the question is: How did someone like Ambedkar respond to the national question and at the same time, forge together a political community? By examining the connection between Ambedkar and South India, notably Malabar, this paper attempts to address and explores this question. While considering the case of South Indian politics, Aloysius notes the existence of social crises within subaltern life, given the impetus for organised activities in the mid-nineteenth century (Aloysius 1998). In the Madras presidency, Dalits were organized

under the nomenclature Depressed Class, Adi-Dravida, or Panchama. By forming caste associations, they expanded the discourse of justice and civil rights (Arnold et. al. 1976, Jeffrey 1974). Demands for access to public spaces, higher varna status, and equal treatment under the law were raised through petitions or memorandums addressed to the government. In 1891, for instance, the *Dravida Mahajana Sangam*, an organization of Pariahs, filed a petition demanding specific rights and provisions (Rajadurai and Geetha 1998). Given the context of the Malabar, many Dalit leaders joined nationalist, socialist, and communist movements; but their contributions remain overlooked within the public sphere. As Aloysius (1998) points out, these little-known figures have been waiting for writers and thinkers to discover and place them in history.

The assertions made by the lower-castes, particularly the Dalits, have not been adequately captured by historians, whether they be nationalist historians, neo-colonialists, Marxists, Subaltern Studies scholars, or those who emphasize the importance of postcolonialism within historical analysis (Jangam 2015). In fact, the influential framework of scholarship on Dalits in India, such as the frame of the Gandhian Harijan ideology, the colonial historiographical approach, the nationalist view of Indian society, and Nehruvian developmentalism, have all excluded Dalits and their perspectives from entering academic debates (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). Rawat and Satyanarayana also note that Ambedkar's criticism of Indian society and the Gandhian nationalist movement remained on the margins until the 1990s. Similarly, Dalit resistance to untouchability and upper-caste oppression was usually depicted in Indian historiography as sectarian, pro-British, and anti-national. Chinnaiah Jangam (2016) notes that recent writings, however, have placed Dalits at the forefront of South Asian histories, not only as political actors but rather as thinkers who tried to rewrite and transform ideologies and struggles in modern India (Gundimeda 2016, Rao 2009, Rawat 2011, Viswanath 2014a).

In keeping with this trend, this essay examines narratives of resistance, mainly against caste oppression, and analyses untold stories of the depressed classes as key players in the social and political spaces. This paper is based on letters written by B.R. Ambedkar to E. Kannan, who was the General Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Congress, between 1930 and 1945. With the exception of scholarship that explores Ambedkar's communication with A.V. Thakkar, the letters he wrote to others seem to have received little attention (Srivatsan 2008). These letters are important, as they present ideas and debates on how to transform India's depressed classes into a political force, and perhaps even critique Gandhi and the Congress. These texts certainly contain some of Ambedkar and Kannan's most profound and nuanced view on caste inequality, an autonomous anti-caste movement, dynamics of political space, and emancipatory potentialities. In addition to the letters, I have also used ethnographic field notes, interviews, biographies, and archival materials.

Depressed Classes in Malabar

Between 1920 and 1935, the British used the term 'Depressed Classes' to describe people who were politically, culturally, and socially oppressed by the dominant castes. But, within the group of "depressed classes," there were also many others including

hill tribes and criminal tribes (Ambedkar 1990,Viswanath 2014b).¹ The depressed class movement had a tremendous influence over the Malabar district between 1920 and 1940. Formed under diverse regional/ national political factions, such as the Congress and Non-Brahmin groups, the key contention was: who represented the depressed classes of India. The Malabar district was a hotbed of religious orthodoxy, in which caste had gained foothold, and this had various repercussions on human life in the region (Baden-Powell 1892). The region's distinct social system, fuelled by caste ideology, reduced many castes and communities to a lower social position. Similarly depressed classes were subjugated to the position of agrestic slaves. Colonial regimes were sympathetic to local power structures rather than to the plight of the scores of labourers and slaves in their dominion (Rao 2009).

Until the middle of the 19th century, depressed classes comprised the category of agrestic slaves, forced to work on lands owned by their masters belonging to upper castes (Hjeje 1967, Mohan 2006). The depressed classes movement in Travancore and Kochi on the other hand, is well-documented (Basu 2016, Chentharassery 1970, 1979, Raamadaas 2009). But then, there is also not too much of historical evidence, as to the leadership of the depressed classes that were first organized in Malabar. As early as 1900, there were many prominent communities in British India that initiated a collective effort towards social progress by forming sabhas, sanghams or caste associations (Arnold et al. 1976, Jeffrey 1974, Rudolph 2010, Rudolph and Rudolph 1960). These efforts first proliferated in Madras and thereafter arrived in the Malabar, but there was hardly any such exclusive *sabha* of any of the Dalit castes in Malabar.² Shanmugam Mudaliar, Depressed Classes Mission leader, worked among depressed classes in Palakkad as early as 1918 in South Malabar. He attempted to put an end to the practice of women wearing a brass bracelet as a caste marker. Before 1918, they could not have thought of not wearing metal bracelets since not wearing metal bracelets was considered unacceptable. Cheruma women stopped wearing metal bracelets as a result of the Mudaliar-led social movement. In 1919, the *Panchamas* assembled at Kalpadakkal in Kannadi village for a meeting.

The conference passed resolutions and sent memorandums to the government, demanding that the *Panchamas* and other lower castes be provided access to public roads, wells, and schools and the first South Malabar Harijan Conference was also hosted in Kannadi in 1936. Dakshayani Velayudhan, the first Dalit woman graduate, presided over the prestigious conference, that was also attended by Kochi Member of Legislative Council, K.P. Vallon, and the Malabar District Board member E. Kannan (Chami 1936). The Depressed Classes leadership of south Malabar accessed multiple political resources for the cause of their community. For example, Chathan Master, a social reformer and educator, initially supported Congress. Similarly to his predecessor Shanmugam Mudaliar, he fought in the 1930s to end the practise of

¹In some scholarly works, the category of Depressed Classes have included Panchamas, criminal tribes, and aboriginal and hill tribes (see Viswanath [2014b]). While giving evidence before the Simon Commission, Ambedkar suggests that both 'hill tribes' and 'criminal tribes' fall under the category of the 'Depressed Class' (See Ambedkar [1990]).

² In 1907, Ayyankali initiated the formation of the 'Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam' in Travancore. In 1913, the Kochi Pulaya Maha Sabha was also formed. There is no record of a similar organisation being formed in Malabar during the colonial period.

women wearing brass bangles as caste markers, and to defend Dalit women's right to wearing upper-body clothes (the breast-cloth controversy). In the early 19th century South Travancore, Nadar women launched the Channar revolt, also known as the Maru Marakkal Samaram, to defend their right to wear upper-cloth (Hardgrave Jr. 1968). Due to his efforts, Dalit women began wearing jackets in defiance to upper-caste mandates, despite the hostility faced from them. In Thenkurissi village of south Malabar, where the Dalits were the least educated, Chathan also founded a Panchama school (Manorama 2019). Following Chathan's invitation, M.K. Gandhi visited this school and addressed a huge crowd comprising Depressed Classes in 1934.³ Gandhi travelled all the way from Palakkad to the venue with Ambad Kombi, a devoted Congress worker and freedom fighter.⁴ Chathan eventually joined the Congress Socialist Party and maintained close ties with Jayaprakash Narayan.

The Congress had the support of prominent Dalit farmers from the Malabar area, like Karutha Eacharan of Kothodu village, Palani of Mannam village, and Kandan Kunnukadu. Although less in number, they sought to improve the social standing of their community by resisting upper-caste domination and violence. Karutha Eacharan also built an elementary school in Kothodu, served as Bench Magistrate, and was President of the Palghat Depressed Class League.⁵ In fact, the founding of schools, it was said, “altered the social fabric and power relations in villages” (Kumar 2019). Later, in 1956, Karutha Eacharan was elected to the first Kerala Legislative Assembly from Chittur (Reserved). Vella Eacharan, who was the ex-Minister for Harijan Welfare and Community Development and the former Member of Parliament, became the President of the Depressed Class League in Malabar, and a member of the All India Working Committee.⁶ Thus, the Depressed Classes collectively transformed their caste habitus and marked their presence in the social space by becoming anti-caste leaders, activists, and educators.

At first, the Depressed Classes movement was a charitable and social service endeavour led by upper-caste elites, with the aim of elevating ‘Untouchables’. There was no united political organisation for the depressed classes that could demand autonomy, rights, justice, and political recognition. The Depressed Classes were organised into a variety of associations, some of which even appeared to be rivals. Narayan Chandravarkar, the president of the Depressed Classes Mission Society and an ex-president of Congress who visited Calicut in January 1915, and Vitthal Ramji Shinde of the Depressed Class Mission Society who visited Malabar on many occasions, wielded substantial influence over the Depressed Classes (Shinde, 1919), as the latter were divided into separate interest groups, rather than being unified under one political umbrella. The All-India Depressed Class Association was the first such united body that was founded in Nagpur in 1926 with M.C. Rajah as its first president. Following this, the All-India Depressed Classes Congress was formed in August 1930 at Nagpur, with Ambedkar as President and E. Kannan (from Calicut) as its General

³ The reception venue was a huge structure made of bamboo, wood, and palm leaves set up in the school compound. Because of ‘Untouchability’ and debasement, all the work for this was done at night. (Vella, interview: 17.11.2017, Lakshmi and Surendran, interview: 01.06.2017)

⁴ Vella, interview: 31.10.2017, Nagan, interview: 8.11.2017.

⁵ Velayudhan, interview: 17.06.2017

⁶ Mani, interview: 17.01.2018

Secretary. Ambedkar had left the earlier All-India Depressed Class Association initiated in 1926 after realising that the 'Untouchables' could only end their oppression if they all stood together and united. So, he set out to create a pan-Indian movement enabled by the formation of the All-India Depressed Class Congress that, Ambedkar wished, would successfully run as the central association of all Depressed Classes in India. The conference passed many resolutions to the effect of demanding immediate dominion status, rejecting the Simon commission report, and calling for universal suffrage with protectionary provisions made for 'Untouchables', that would secure their inclusion in the various legislative councils, and ensure reservation for them in public services (Omvedt 2017).

Since 1910, the political sphere of the provinces was dominated by organisations that claimed to serve the interests of caste-based communities, and soon, appeals for caste solidarity became deeply ingrained within the modern political discourse (Washbrook 1975). The non-Brahmin leaders, in their attempt to establish greater political alliances, strongly supported the Adi Dravida claim to social equality just before the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Prominent non-Brahmin leaders also conducted many conferences to get the Adi Dravida groups close to their own doctrine. The non-Brahmin movement opposed Brahmin monopoly and caste oppression. A dyarchy system of governance was introduced after the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. The size of provincial legislative assemblies therefore also increased. The Madras government designated some members of the Depressed Classes to the newly formed Legislative Council (Washbrook 1976). The Act of 1919 dramatically enhanced representation and leaders like M.C. Rajah, R. Veerian, and Rettamalai Srinivasan vehemently voiced numerous issues that concerned the Depressed Classes at the Council. Lower-caste groups such as the Ezhavas also always sought cooperation from the representatives of this Council, before raising demands and protesting their grievances (Viswanath 2014a). The dyarchy constitution encouraged the rise of associations claiming to represent specific communities (Jeffrey 1974).

Depressed class representatives nominated to the Madras Provincial Legislative Assembly after 1919 constantly exerted pressure on the government to establish their right to access public places (Viswanath 2014a). The government granted all 'Untouchables' the freedom to walk in the village streets and to use all public wells, canals, and buildings in the Madras Presidency in August 1924, following a bill that was introduced in this regard by Rettamalai Sreenivasan (Kumar 2021). The Ezhava community in Palakkad, which had spent years fighting for the right to walk in the streets—with these public spaces being dominated by upper-caste Hindus, also decided to exercise their rights as established by the new law. During the car festival, they ventured into the Kalpathy Brahmin Street, and this immediately incited the rage of Brahmins. There was a subsequent government ban on lower-caste entry to these areas.

A few Ezhavas in protest became Christians, Arya Samajists, Muslims, Buddhists, and Brahmo Samajists (Chami 1936, Vijayan 2016). Several presidency districts reported Depressed Classes uprisings, protesting against their social disabilities in this period (Armitage 1921), with such incidents demonstrating the extent of upper-caste Hindu animosity against *avarnas* across the country. The lower-castes continued their fight

for civil rights, but it is worth mentioning here that none of these struggles received any substantial support from Gandhi or the Congress—the main political force at the time. Between 1924 and 1930, Gandhi and the Congress did not take any significant steps toward the abolition of ‘Untouchability’, and neither did they appear to have undertaken any ventures that were beneficial to untouchables. As Ambedkar stated, the ‘Untouchables’ had initiated Satyagraha (nonviolent protest or peaceful resistance) that would establish their right to draw water from public wells, and enter public temples. The Satyagraha at Chowdar Tank in Mahad and at the Kala Ram temple in Nashik for example were accompanied by many other similar struggles (Ambedkar 1991).

There is a popular theory that the Depressed Classes movement in Malabar was dormant and lacked political leadership. In contrast, Erikkittaparambath Kannan (E. Kannan) who worked closely with Ambedkar, was also a member of the Madras Legislative Council, belonging himself to the untouchable Kanaka community. He was elected to the Malabar District Board from the town of Chevayur in 1932 and 1940.⁷ Since Ambedkar had little clout among the Depressed Classes of the Madras presidency, it was likely that he learned about the problems of the ‘Untouchables’ in Malabar from the letters sent to him by E. Kannan (Meloth 2018). C.C. Kunjan preserved Ambedkar's letters sent to E. Kannan and published them in 1983 in a book titled *A Bunch of Letters by Dr. Ambedkar* (cf. Kunjan 1983). This collection of forty-three letters written between 1930 and 1950, reveal the compassion and intellect of the two prominent leaders, demonstrating their shifting political views during a time of political turmoil.

Kannan, in fact, served as an organic link between Ambedkar and Malabar. Just a few weeks before the Depressed Class Congress meeting at Nagpur, Ambedkar urged Kannan to contact all the leading men, “all those who are worth having in the Madras Presidency, and to ensure their effective cooperation” (ibid: 28).⁸ Kannan suggested printing the conference papers in both English and in the vernacular and Ambedkar, for his part, enthusiastically accepted Kannan's proposal to launch an English periodical. Given the diversity of organisations, Ambedkar assumed that widespread dissemination of knowledge about the Congress's political position could serve as a corrective measure for the many ‘misguided’ members of the Depressed Classes (ibid 1983).⁹ Ambedkar on many occasions recognized and praised Kannan's work, lauding his determination to keep the ‘flag flying.’ This is demonstrated by Ambedkar writing to Kannan from London, from where he was attending the Second Round Table Conference, acknowledging Kannan's contributions by saying: “you are a great worker, and I am sorry that the Depressed Classes have not given you enough field to display your activity” (ibid: 58).¹⁰ During the debates of the Constitutional Assembly, H.J. Khandekar also mentions E. Kannan, along with B.R. Ambedkar, R. Srinivasan, Munisami Pillay, and M.C. Rajah, praising them for their work on abolishing ‘Untouchability’ and caste-oppression in India (Official Report 2014).

⁷ Fort St. George Gazette Online Archive, 06.02.1940, Issue Number: 5, Part: I A: 102)

⁸ Ambedkar to Kannan, 1st August 1930.

⁹ Ambedkar to Kannan, 1st September 1930.

¹⁰Ambedkar to Kannan, 11th November 1931.

Conversations about Political Safeguards

Ambedkar's efforts to secure special protection for 'Untouchables' has a long history. When Ambedkar was invited to testify before the Southborough Committee in 1919 (Berg 2020), he was invited for being the only 'Untouchable'-caste person, who had earned a graduate degree in the whole Bombay presidency (Jaffrelot 2006). He argued for universal franchise, Dalit access to public spaces, and demanded that 'Untouchables' be regarded as a separate category within the future constitutional framework (Verma 1999). Ambedkar primarily claimed that because 'Untouchables' were a disadvantaged group, in terms of their education status and access to economic opportunities, their suffrage should be arranged in a specific way, and kept distinct from the other castes of Hindus (Kumar 1985).

Nevertheless, the bulk of letters, as this section explores, were written in the context of his involvement in the Round Table Conference that greatly influenced the trajectory of the Depressed Classes movement in India. An important and emergent political question at the time was: which Indian leader had the maximum followers from the Depressed Classes. These letters highlight Ambedkar's selection as the leader of the Depressed Classes at the Round Table and also highlight his attempts at establishing a separate electorate for all 'Untouchables'. The significance of the Round Table Conference lay in the British recognition of the right of Indians to be heard on matters relating to the Constitutional framework of India. The Depressed Classes were allowed to be represented separately by their delegates for the first time (Ambedkar 1946) and the Governor of Bombay expressly invited Ambedkar to the first Round Table Conference (1930) for having "the largest following of the depressed classes in India" (Kunjan 1983: 35).¹¹

Rettamalai Srinivasan was the other Depressed Classes leader to be invited to the Conference, and the other Depressed Classes leaders of Madras: Srinivasan, M. C. Raja and R. Veerian worked diligently both inside and outside the Legislative Council to secure the civic rights of the lower-castes and 'Untouchables'. Srinivasan has proposed a bill that would give the Depressed Classes access to public spaces and he has pushed for a revision of the Indian Civil Service recruitment eligibility criteria (Kumar 2021, Rajangam and Rajasekaran 2020). Munuswamy Pillai, a Depressed Classes member in the Madras Legislative Council in 1926 was already associated with Ambedkar. Because there was no pan-Indian front for 'Untouchables', Ambedkar attempted to forge this unity anew, instructing Kannan and Pillay to meet with Srinivasan, and emphasizing upon him the significance of this unity, as outlined at the Nagpur Congress. Ambedkar's participation in the Round Table Conference was not well received by the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. Ambedkar was concerned that these organisations could try and divide the 'Untouchables', and create political confusion about caste in India. So, he cautioned Kannan: "important leaders of the Depressed Classes stand by Nagpur resolutions and give me full support in any stand I take at the Conference" (Kunjan 1983: 39).¹² Seeking support, Ambedkar briefed Srinivasan two or three times about the 'stand the representatives of the

¹¹ Ambedkar to Kannan, 8th September 1930: the 'Depressed Classes Congress' meeting in Nagpur appears to have elevated Ambedkar to the position of a mass leader of the 'Untouchables'.

¹² Ambedkar to Kannan, 17th August 1930.

Depressed Classes should take', hoping to 'bring Srinivasan down to his point of view. The two teamed up on their concern about the cause of 'Untouchables' even though their age gap kept them from becoming friends.

Ambedkar met with the Secretary of State Lansbury, Graham Pole, the Secretary of the Trade Union Congress, and with Philip Chetwood, who was the Commander-in-Chief of India, on issue surrounding the recruitment of Depressed Classes in the army. Military services provided 'Untouchables' with tremendous social mobility. The demand for the inclusion of 'Untouchables' in the army has a long history, but as a result of internal army reorganisations, their service as sepoys had decreased, and was subsequently discontinued (Cohen 1969, Constable 2001, Kumbhojkar 2012, Omissi 1991).

Ambedkar wrote a small presentation entitled *The Untouchables and the Pax Britannica*, referring to the case of untouchables in the army (Ambedkar 2011). The Depressed Classes were outraged by their lack of representation at the Conference and sensing their rage, Kannan wrote to Ambedkar, advising him to push for greater representation of members from the Depressed Classes in London. Ambedkar realised that "this error was now irreversible, particularly because it was too late to raise such an issue" (Kunjan 1983: 44) and the officials were of the opinion that "there were no qualified persons to represent the Depressed Classes" (ibid.). For Ambedkar, the reason for the lack of a wider representation lay in the fact that "the Depressed Classes movement is yet a weak movement that has recently emerged and is has attracted the attention it deserves" (ibid: 43). He hoped that the organisation would gain ample prominence as it continued to expand. Following the Montagu Chelmsford reforms, the people of Malabar were given the right to elect two representatives to the Legislative Council.

In 1930, Kannan ran in the elections for a seat in the Madras Legislative Council but was not nominated; instead, a Brahmin was chosen. Kannan shared his indignation with Ambedkar about nomination systems and schemes that limited the opportunities of Depressed Classes groups from being elected. Depressed Classes members were barred from sending members of their castes to the Council and they therefore believed that the system would soon, only serve the needs of Malabar's dominant Hindu castes. If the government continued in this direction, then most Hindus too, would be denied representation. The lower-castes of south Malabar approached the government with memorandums and petitions highlighting the problem of their under-representation and the shortcomings of the nomination system (Chami 1936). The Members of the Parliament on the other hand promised to help Ambedkar, when he explained to them the "position of the untouchables in the future constitution of India" (Kunjan 1983:47). In addition to his memorial address about the entry of the Depressed Classes into the military, delivered at the Conference on the Protection of the Depressed Classes, Ambedkar also offered to publicly distribute copies of his memorial address. By then, he also urged Kannan to call meetings across India and to storm the Prime Minister with telegrams containing "irreducible, must be granted requests" (ibid: 50).¹³ As Ambedkar was scheduled to arrive in Bombay on 27th

¹³ Ambedkar to Kannan, 6th January 1931.

February 1931, he proposed to convene a session of the Depressed Classes Congress Committee members to discuss a possible action plan that would diplomatically resolve the 'Untouchable' issue, for which he was prepared to travel to the United States and to the Secretariat of the League of Nations. Although the Congress chose not to participate in the first Round Table discussion, Ambedkar was interested in the Congress' reaction to the Nagpur meeting of the Depressed Classes Congress. Kannan sent a letter to the Secretary of Congress, enclosing the memorandum and soliciting their feedback. Jawaharlal Nehru, who was supposed to stop-over at Calicut on his way back from Ceylon responded to the question of the status of 'Untouchables' by saying: "I know this, however, that I want every kind of social exploitation, humiliation and tyranny to be put down and stamped out, and I propose to fight for it until I succeed", and he reiterated "the struggle against untouchability has always been at the forefront of the congress program" (ibid: 89-90).¹⁴

Again, Ambedkar was invited to the Federal Structure Committee, of the second session of the Indian Round Table Conference (1931). By this time, Ambedkar had won the support of the Depressed Classes in several provinces. Before departing from Bombay, Ambedkar wrote to Kannan that he had received telegrams from members of the Depressed Classes from all over India "displaying their trust in him and condemning the view of Gandhi and the Congress."¹⁵ Srinivasan and Ambedkar drew up another supporting memorandum, defining the requirements for the special political representation of the 'Untouchables' (Ambedkar 1982). Surprisingly, M.C. Rajah, the president of the All-India Depressed Classes Association also wrote to Kannan during the preparations for the Round Table negotiations. Rajah, a member of the Central Legislative Assembly, was present at the ongoing Council session of Shimla. Rajah supported separate electorates, while Ambedkar wanted a joint electorate for all 'Untouchables' with adult suffrage and seat reservation. Rajah seemed to have praised Ambedkar's work at the Round Table Conference and managing to meet the Viceroy and Reforms Commissioner, he discussed the necessity of sending at least one person from the Depressed Classes to the Round Table Conference, and tabled a motion to that effect in the Assembly (Kunjan 1983).¹⁶ Instead of Srinivasan, Rajah thought that Munuswamy Pillay would represent the Depressed Classes and agreed with Kannan's proposition that a joint representation should be signed by the leading members of the 'Untouchable' community from all districts. Rajah sent two telegrams to the Manchester Guardian and the Times of London, refuting Gandhi's claim that the Congress was the leader of the Depressed Classes, and mailed separate memoranda to that effect, at the Round Table Conference. He did so with the hope that it would help Ambedkar in London. Ambedkar was amused by Raja's gesture, writing: "it is something when it comes from a man who is jealous of maintaining his leadership" (ibid: 59).¹⁷ Ambedkar sent Kannan a copy of the Manchester Guardian report containing Raja's statement. In statements to the Manchester Guardian and the Times of London, Rajah refuted Gandhi's claim that the Congress is the champion of the Depressed Classes. Contrarily, Rajah wanted Ambedkar "not to demand joint electorate, but instead to stand for a separate electorate even if the depressed

¹⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru to Kannan, 2nd July 1931.

¹⁵ Ambedkar to Kannan, 11th November 1931.

¹⁶ M.C. Rajah to Kannan, 26th September 1931.

¹⁷ Ambedkar to Kannan, 11th November 1931.

classes are not given an adult franchise” (ibid: 60-61).¹⁸ When Ambedkar was designated to the Indian Franchise Committee (1932), tasked with gathering evidence from the Depressed Classes and conveying it to the Committee, Ambedkar sought Kannan’s assistance to tour the region with the Committee, asking him to work as “liaison officer between him and the leaders of the depressed Classes in each province” (ibid: 62).¹⁹ However, while Kannan and Munuswamy Pillay proposed to submit their memorandum on behalf of the Depressed Classes Congress to the Franchise Committee, Ambedkar insisted that the memorandum “be read before it was submitted” (ibid: 63). And for reference, Ambedkar also sent Kannan a copy of the responses prepared on behalf of the Bombay Association.

Kannan decided to hold the second session of the Depressed Class Congress in Kamptee (near Nagpur). Regrettably, since the previous meeting was also held in the Central Provinces, Ambedkar was opposed to having the next session in Kamptee and due to this scheduling conflict, Kannan also decided to stay away. Interestingly, Kannan had not only taken steps to organize the session earlier on, but had also kept insisting that it be held. Ambedkar was saddened that Kannan would be unable to attend the session and reprimanded Kannan gently by saying: “if you want to maintain the public life of the community you all must take your responsibilities more seriously than you appear to do” (ibid: 65).²⁰ Annoyed by the attitude of his other colleagues, Ambedkar further reminded them: “if the support is so half-hearted, I am afraid I will sit at home and attend to my own affairs. Do not think it is only a threat. I mean it” (ibid: 65).²¹ Finally, Kannan had no choice but to make a compromise and attend the conference, presided over by Munusamy Pillai on 8th May 1932 in Kamptee.²² In the last week of May 1932, Ambedkar decided to leave for London as he had heard about the communal settlements that the Prime Minister was about to make. The proposal had separate electorates for Madras, Bombay, and the Central Provinces, and joint electorates for the rest of the country. Ambedkar figured “this would be disastrous not only to the Depressed Classes of those Provinces but to the unity of the Depressed Classes movement as a whole” (Kunjan 1983: 66).²³ It was at this juncture that Ambedkar started working on the task of establishing a collective Federation. Just a day before embarking for London, Ambedkar requested that Kannan send a telegram on his behalf to the ‘All-India Depressed Classes Federation’ committee, stating that “the Depressed Classes seek separate electorates and seats in accordance with the Minorities Pact” (ibid: 67).²⁴

For scholars Kothari and Maru (1965), the Federation represented a step beyond the caste-associations, in the Indian development towards a political community. Thus, the Federation's inception was the first step in transforming ‘Untouchables’ into a political community. In addition, Ambedkar considered political action to encapsulate an

¹⁸ M C Rajah to Kannan, 26th September 1931.

¹⁹ Ambedkar to Kannan, 13th January 1932.

²⁰ Ambedkar to Kannan, 21st April 1932.

²¹ Ambedkar to Kannan, 21st April 1932

²² Babu Mangu Ram and N. Sivaraj also attended this session.

²³ Ambedkar to Kannan, 25th May 1932.

²⁴ Ambedkar to Kannan, 25th May 1932. However, the political front the Scheduled Castes Federation took shape only in 1942 at the Nagpur conference.

important instrument that the 'Untouchables' could use, that would take him towards emancipation" (Jaffrelot 2006). While the various religious minorities had separate political representation in the Central and Provincial Assemblies of British India since 1909 (Thorat 2019), the 'Untouchables' were never considered a 'minority'. The assertion that the Depressed Classes were a caste-based minority was defended by Ambedkar, since it was true that religious belonging was used as the primary demographical criterion for classifying a community as a minority, especially for the purposes of enabling political reservation. Nonetheless, Ambedkar insisted that it was the prevalence of discrimination, in addition to the size of the population, that determined whether a group was a minority or not. In his essay *States and Minorities* Ambedkar perfectly illustrates why 'Untouchables' should be classified as minorities, just like Muslims and Christians (Ambedkar 1979).

Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that the bond between Hindu castes and 'Untouchables' was so essential that its breakdown into a separate category would result in the collapse of Hindu society. For Gandhi, it was the moral duty of sensitive Hindus to correct the flaws of Hindu caste society. Contrastingly, Ambedkar highlighted some serious concerns about caste in his polemic *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), arguing that caste had eroded the very definition of Hindu ethics and morality. Gandhi and Ambedkar's opposing views on the prospect of attempting to reform Hindu society from within sparked a big political conflict. Ambedkar prepared a statement and presented it to the Prime Minister, and sent a copy of this declaration to be made available among the provincial branches of the Federation. When he came to know that the Hindu Mahasabha leader Moonje and M.C. Rajah were going to England to press for a joint electorate, he commented: "there can be no respectable hearing here" (Kunjan 1983: 69).²⁵ In fact, Dhananjay Keer, Ambedkar's biographer, discusses the decade's nuanced politics by saying (Keer 1971: 195):

Dr. Moonje made a pact with M. C. Rajah on the basis of reserved seats and joint electorates. Rajah submitted to the British Premier his memorandum telegraphically giving details of his pact with Dr. Moonje. This pact put Ambedkar in an awkward position. It may be recalled that it was Rajah who had cabled to Ambedkar and supported his demand for separate electorates, saying that Gandhi evidently did not know their woes, and therefore he had tried to force joint electorates down the unwilling throats of the Depressed Classes. Originally, the Rajah Party stood for joint electorates with reserved seats. But he changed sides.... he had dropped the idea of joint electorates and insisted on separate electorates. And now he reverted to the original demand. Ambedkar too changed sides.... Ambedkar switched over to separate electorates.

Irrespective of these uncertainties, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald issued the Communal Award on 16th August 1932, to protect the interests of specific social groups by establishing separate electorates. While the Depressed Classes were given two votes—one in the separate constituency and one in the common constituency, the 'Untouchables' were recognised as a minority group outside of Hinduism. Gandhi

²⁵ Ambedkar to Kannan, 14th June 1932.

opposed Harijans being given separate reservation or preferential representation within the frame of the Depressed Classes, whether through joint or separate electorates, arguing at the Round Table Conference that they were Hindus, who should not be divided from Hindus.

Thus, immediately after the announcement of the Communal Award, Gandhi informed the Prime Minister that he would begin a 'fast unto death' beginning on 20th September 1932, unless the decision of making a special electorate for 'Untouchables' was revoked. Upon his return from London in August, Ambedkar suggested holding a meeting of the Federation's working committee and sent Kannan a copy of the statement issued to the press on the Communal Award in order to avoid any conflict of opinion. Ambedkar had assumed that the proposal, he and R. Srinivasan had made would be accepted with some variations during negotiations. Instead, the Communal Award downsized representations in the legislative bodies to a very negligible numbers. The demand for the representation of the Depressed Classes of Punjab had also been rejected. However, in contrast, Indian Christians and Anglo-Indians were considered a special group and this according to Ambedkar was already a compromise. He commented: "The Communal Award satisfied those who wanted separate electorates and those who wished joint electorates" (Ambedkar 1991a: 314). Ambedkar sent Kannan a copy of the 'The Statement- Depressed Classes and the Communal Award', so he could form his opinion. In view of this injustice inflicted by the Government, the All-India Depressed Classes Federation registered their opposition to the award (Kunjan 1983: 72).²⁶ Ambedkar felt that The Round Table Conference had failed to deliver justice, and as he wrote to Kannan: "do not seek for any conference. In fact I am saying that there is no necessity for a conference. The conference will be a trap. We must insist on Gandhi disclosing his proposals first" (ibid: 73).²⁷

Ambedkar proposed convening a meeting in Allahabad on September 24, 1932, in order to reach a final decision on the stance to be taken, as Gandhi had proposed a fast on September 24. Though Kannan was not keeping in good health, Ambedkar was trying to convince him of the vulnerable position they were in when saying: "in spite of all difficulties and anxieties, we must be firm as the fast is coming as the greatest challenge not only to our rising into a political force in the country but also to our very political existence" (Kunjan 1983: 74).²⁸ Ambedkar also sent a telegram to Kannan, requesting him to accept the proposed meeting date, but just two days later, he told Kannan that the Allahabad meeting had been cancelled, and instructed him to proceed to Bombay instead (ibid: 75).²⁹ India's most complex political crisis emerged following Gandhi's fast, and leaders from various backgrounds set out to resolve it. M.M. Malviya called an emergency conference of the Depressed Classes and other Hindu groups on 19th September seeking a "formula for the amicable settlement of Dr. Ambedkar's revolt against Hinduism" (Baader 1937: 417). Ambedkar yielded to pressure from political leaders at this time and agreed to a compromise, which resulted in the Poona Pact, signed on 24th September 1932. Gandhi applauded the move, which signalled

²⁶ Ambedkar to Kannan, 23rd August 1932.

²⁷ Ambedkar to Kannan, 17th September 1932.

²⁸ Ambedkar to Kannan, 18th September 1932.

²⁹ Telegrams sent by Ambedkar to Kannan, 19th September 1932, and 21st September 1932.

the end of his fast. Separate electorates were replaced by reservation within joint electorates under the Poona Pact, and by reserving seats for the Depressed Classes in both the central and provincial legislatures, the Poona Pact recognised 'Untouchables' as a political category in British India (Jaffrelot 2003, Verma 2019).

Despite upper-caste propaganda, Kannan was unanimously nominated for the Malabar District Board in November 1932, and this was despite of his facing a defeat in the Taluk Board (district subdivision-administrating body). In his capacity as the Joint Secretary of the All-India Depressed Classes Federation, he wrote to Gandhi about the hardships 'Untouchables' faced in contesting elections. Gandhi replied from Yerwada Central Prison by saying "I cannot solve individual suffering cases" (Kunjan 1983: 78) and suggested that Kannan meet with other local leaders to learn the reasons underlying this better. Gandhi forwarded Kannan's letter to the Malabar Congress leader Madhavan Nair, anticipating a coordinated response. Gandhi did not see any role of caste-discrimination in these hardships and added: "individual instances of suffering are bound to occur amid all the attempts" and claimed that "the Yerwada Pact was much better than the Prime minister's scheme in every aspect" (ibid), referring here to the Poona Pact of 1932. The response made by Madhavan Nair to Gandhi's suggestion is unknown, but Kannan was defeated by upper-caste leadership in the elections. Ambedkar too, was reluctant to claim the unanimous backing of all the oppressed classes, notwithstanding his rise to national prominence. Just using his debate over the Joint Parliamentary Committee (1935) report as an example, he really did not wish to make a declaration about any crucial issue involving the Depressed Classes. Instead, he called for a statement to be made on behalf of the Federation. Ambedkar felt unhappy because the proposed changes made by the Upper House of the Constitutional Committee significantly undermined any chance of the Depressed Classes ever having any political representation. M.C. Rajah in turn contradicted Ambedkar's vision by saying: "there is nothing for the Depressed Classes to worry about, in the report of the Joint Parliamentary Committee" (Kunjan 1983: 83).³⁰ Since Rajah's statement might have been misleading and given a false impression, Ambedkar prompted Kannan to clarify this. Though the Round Table Conference constituted a turning point for debates on 'Untouchability' and the political representation of 'Untouchables' in India, Kannan got recognition for working with Ambedkar. It is unknown if this debate sparked any further political discussions among the 'Untouchable' communities of Malabar.

Reflections on Depressed Classes and Swaraj

After the tragic events in Punjab, specifically the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on April 13, 1919, Gandhi lost faith in the righteousness of British rule.. He called British rule "satanic" and declared the only way to end it was "Swaraj" (independence). Swaraj could be attained in a year, he imagined (Gandhi 2000: 278-281). For Gandhi, Swaraj was not just a question of who held the government reins; he saw Swaraj, or self-rule as a quality or state of life which could only exist when and where Indians would follow their traditional civilization, uncorrupted by modern innovations (Brown 1974: 14). Antithetical to Gandhian ideas, lower-castes conceptualised Swaraj as conditionally

³⁰ Ambedkar to Kannan, 6th January 1935.

real—real only if Depressed Classes elected their own representatives, and were able to send them to the legislative assemblies, and gradually transfer governmental power to natives. Swarajism was perceived as synonymous with Brahminism, and Brahmin politicians were accused of wearing the mask of Swarajism to conceal their inner selfish motivations, and maintain their rights, privileges, and monopolies (Mitra 1925).³¹ Adi Hindu leaders believed that winning Swaraj for India would strengthen their enslavement (Rawat 2011). On the other hand, Gandhi felt that the Congress' call for *Poorna* Swaraj or full independence was the only reasonable answer to the Indian problem (Kumar 1985). Ambedkar alleged that Gandhi's move urged the 'Untouchables' not to join hands with the British against Swaraj, but to make common cause with Hindus and help them win Swaraj. Ambedkar writes to this effect (Ambedkar 1946: 198):

On this analysis, Swaraj would make Hindus more powerful and Untouchables more helpless and it is quite possible that having regard to the economic advantages which it gives to the Hindus, Swaraj, instead of putting an end to Untouchability, may extend its life. That Untouchability is vanishing is therefore only wishful thinking and a calculated untruth.

Ambedkar thought that if Swaraj was to become a reality, Hindus would automatically become strengthened, and this would only strengthen 'Untouchability'. However, on the other hand, he did not take an oppositional stance to the Indian desire for autonomy either. While others criticized the fact that 'Untouchables' were not in political tandem with the nationalist demand, Ambedkar wrote to E. Kannan while attending Round Table Conference in London (Kunjan 1983: 49):³²

...the full solution to the problems of Scheduled Castes could be found only in independent India and it will be suicidal to the Depressed Classes to run away from Swaraj. It is their only Salvation, and I am happy to know that you and many of our people are in agreement with me.

He feared however that Swaraj could not be a blessing unless the Depressed Classes were given the political safeguards they deemed necessary. Ambedkar wanted adequate safeguards for all 'Untouchables' in independent India and the Congress project for Swaraj only angered the lower-castes in Malabar, resulting in them publicly campaigning against the Congress (Chami 1936). In 1942, like several other Harijan activists, Kannan joined the Congress.³³ Munusami Pillai had already merged with the Indian National Congress and was serving as the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in Madras. Ambedkar sought categorical answers from them asking: "When are you, the people who joined the Congress, going to open your eyes" (Kunjan 1983: 86).³⁴ Ambedkar's criticism was valid. Firstly, the Congress, which had been in power for about two years and seven months by then, had not achieved much in terms of the betterment of the Depressed Classes. In his book, *What Congress and Gandhi*

³¹ In his speech to the Madras Non-Brahmin Confederation Conference, Bhaskarrao Vithojirao Jadhav, the Education minister of Bombay equated Swarajism with Brahminism.

³² Ambedkar to Kannan, 6th January 1931.

³³ Depressed Classes leaders like Jagjivan Ram also joined with the Congress in 1930.

³⁴ Ambedkar to Kannan, 23rd December 1942.

Have Done to Untouchables (1991), Ambedkar took a critical look at Congress attitudes toward the Depressed Classes. Secondly, Gandhi and the Congress considered the Muslim League to be a party that granted protection to Muslims, and yet, at the same time, the Congress never cared to accommodate the demands of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi rejected the recognition of Depressed Classes as a distinct political group eligible for specific political rights. Ambedkar felt disappointed with political leaders like Kannan who “still have confidence in Gandhi that he would do justice to the Depressed Class” (ibid: 87). He asks yet again: “it is up to you now to consider whether you believe that the depressed classes have the same political rights as the Muslims are demanding” (ibid). The political convictions of leaders like Kannan were reshaped by the strains of intra-politics within the Depressed Classes and the increasing complexity of regional and national politics. Their conversation sheds light on these shifting political patterns. Once Kannan even went so far as to say that the Harijan movement had completely dissolved. Ambedkar replied: “it was a political movement. It could never stand on its own, and I never expected it to do so” (Kunjan 1983: 80).³⁵ At this time, Ambedkar's political imagination also lost some of its initial steam due to increasing regional and national politics. At the time when Gandhi was being widely recognised, only two letters seem to have been written to Ambedkar from the Malabar, requesting his intervention in anti-caste activities. In the first instance, Kannan asked Ambedkar to accept the presidency of an organization called the Jathinasini Sabha, which Ananda Theerthan had established in 1933.³⁶ Ambedkar was unable to accept this position because he was in London at the time, but he indicated that he would consider the invitation after returning to India. Perhaps this already suggests that leaders of the Depressed Classes were turning towards anti-caste interventions that were spearheaded by upper-caste reformers. The second instance was that of Narayan Swami of the All Travancore Pulayar Cheramar Aykia Maha Sangham, who wrote to Ambedkar from Kerala, asking for guidance on the condition of the Depressed Classes (Ambedkar 1991b: 320).³⁷ There is ambiguity about the role played by Ambedkar in the South, and about whether he was resilient enough as a leader for the southern contexts.

Gandhi, Hindu Social Reform, and the Depressed Classes

Regionally, there are many facets to the influx of people into the Congress. Gandhi, as Ambedkar pointed out as well, simultaneously took up two movements in 1933. The first was the Temple-entry Movement, and the second was the formation of the Harijan Sevak Sangh. ‘Untouchables’ were given the name ‘Harijan’ by Gandhi, a word which meant the ‘children of God’ (Guha 2017). Gandhi urged ‘Untouchables’ to practise cleanliness, and exhorted upper-castes to change their attitudes toward the lower-castes. At the same time, Gandhi exhorted the Nayadis (a Dalit caste) and the Adi-Dravidas of Malabar to join the purification movement (Gandhi 1958a: 317). Aside from urging them to pursue education, he also demanded that they give up their drinking habits, adhere to hygienic practises, and maintain external and internal cleanliness. In this way, he attempted to make clear that untouchability had nothing to do with Hindu

³⁵ Ambedkar to Kannan, 23rd November 1933.

³⁶ Swami Anantha Theertha was an upper-caste reformer known for his crusade against casteism among Harijans. Congress leader K. Kelappan became the first president of the Jathinasini Sabha.

³⁷ Narayan Swami to Ambedkar, 24th November 1938.

religion, and was just a question of hygiene and purity of heart (Gandhi 1947b: 409). In Madras, Gandhi had a good reputation. For instance, during his famous fast in 1932, hundreds of meetings were held in support of him, and upper-caste politicians took up the problems of the Depressed Classes with attempts being made to enable their entry into Hindu temples. Gandhi received unparalleled attention, at the time when he toured for the Harijan Fund, a year later in the Madras province (Baker 1976, Gopalakrishnan 2012). The Civil Disobedience campaign and these two movements from 1933 bolstered Gandhi and helped him in garnering support among Malabar's lower-castes, who had previously been opposed to the Congress. The Congress, which had suffered since the Malabar Rebellion, was revived through the Civil Disobedience Struggle of 1930. Though the idea of Swaraj did not have an action plan to combat 'Untouchability', steps were taken to integrate the fight against caste discrimination with the nationalist movement that included the demand for temple-entry through the Guruvayur Temple Entry Satyagraha (Gopalankutty 1989). Regarding Malabar, Gandhi maintained: "the propaganda for temple-entry has to go on side by side" with other Congress activities (Gandhi 1958, 1974). The Civil Disobedience movement drew new social forces towards the Congress, and the party's social base spread and became enlarged to include the lower, and non-Brahmin castes in many towns and villages from between 1932 to 1942 (Kochanek 2015).

Between 1927 and 1937, non-Brahmins flocked to the Congress in large numbers. The reason for this progress, rather than the Congress's accomplishments, was a shift within non-Brahmin attitudes (Natarajan 1927).³⁸ As their efforts to create a distinct political community and ethnicisation failed, some lower-castes and Depressed Classes of Malabar sought refuge in Gandhi. During his trip to Kerala in October 1927, Gandhi met with two delegations. The first was the Depressed Classes Mission headed by C. Seshayya and the Ezhavas led by Sukumaran, T.M. Chamiappan, and P.C. Gopalan. Gandhi insisted on receiving both the delegations together, as this he thought would bring the Cherumas and the Ezhavas together.³⁹ The representatives of the Ezhavas asked whether there was still any hope of having a purified Hinduism (Gandhi 1958a: 264). Gandhi responded by saying: "Yes, otherwise I would not be a Hindu and could not live" (ibid: 265). When the Depressed Classes representatives sought support for their demand to access public spaces, Gandhi asked: "Why not temple entry also" (ibid: 266)? The economic dependence of the majority of Ezhavas on the upper castes kept them from fighting against caste (Aiyappan, 1965). Inevitably, Gandhi was able to effectively interfere in the agenda of the Depressed Classes and the lower-castes, by directing them to Congress. The Moplah Revolt (1921) and the struggle in Kalpathy in 1924 created an environment of fearfulness all over India, specially the fear of 'religious conversion' to Islam. As a result, south Malabar attracted the attention of Hindu reformers and leaders, religious and communal organisations, particularly Shuddhi and Sangathan movements (Gupta 1998, Natarajan 1925b). Hindu religious reform organisations realised the potential of Malabar: of how there was a "vast field for the work of social uplift in Malabar for those interested in the

³⁸ For instance, the Non-brahmin Confederation at Coimbatore decided to join the Congress.

³⁹ Chamiappan converted to Christianity and P.C. Gopalan joined Aryasamaj in response to Kaplathy struggles.

elevation of the depressed classes” which would avoid the conversion of avarnas to other beliefs(Natarajan 1925a).⁴⁰

Interventions made by the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, and the Hindu Mahasabha brought back converts to Hinduism, and stopped further conversions from taking place. The alternative identity to ‘Untouchables’ that was given by Gandhi and the Congress—‘Harijan’ provided a competitive and collective range of religious and political ideologies, for the purpose of emancipating ‘Untouchables’ through their assimilation and incorporation into the Hindu tradition (Gooptu 2001). As Gandhi explicitly said in his Pakkanarpuram address: “We have to cease to be patrons. We have to purify ourselves from this taint of untouchability immediately and take the Harijans to our bosom” (Gandhi 1974b: 427) While the upper-castes embraced Gandhi's call to cleanse themselves of the stain of ‘Untouchability’, as Srivatsan suggests, this trajectory taken by the upper-castes, of providing services to the lower-castes “contributes to the marginalisation of initiatives and groups that either threaten or contest the hegemonic rise of caste-Hindu elite during colonial rule” (Srivatsan 2019: 23-24). In effect, the Gandhian Harijan ideology and the Hindu Social Reform movement served to effectively invisibilize the resistance of the lower-castes, erasing the caste questions raised by them. At this juncture, ‘Untouchables’, whom Ambedkar described as ‘self-reliant and independent’ had begun to follow the Congress and upper-caste reform movements (Ambedkar 1991).

Conclusion: Recognition or Misrecognition—A Post-Ambedkar Scenario

There is a commonly prevalent opinion that Ambedkar's works are undervalued and that he is only regarded as the author of the Indian Constitution. Although, as Taylor (1994: 25) asserts: “a number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for recognition.” Here, I have presented some examples of misrecognition. For example, In 1957, when Kannan wrote to Rajagopalachari and to President Rajendra Prasad on the Silver Jubilee of the Poona Pact, Rajagopalachari retorted by saying: “This day, twenty-five years ago, was one of the most anxious days in the history of India. I'm glad you remember that at least. I've just written that week's story for All India Radio as the Delhi Broadcast Department” (Kunjan 1983: 84).⁴¹ Rajendra Prasad, by referring to the Poona Pact as a land mark decision in the road to social progress further wrote (ibid: 85):⁴²

I recollect the very anxious times that we had to go through and the ultimate triumph of Mahatma Gandhi's Tapasya. There is no doubt that while untouchability has become a social crime there are still many things which need to be done to raise the normal stature and economic position of the Harijans.

⁴⁰ As word of religious conversion spread across North India, *shuddhi sangathan* activists flocked to Malabar.

⁴¹ C Rajagopalachari to Kannan, 22nd September 1957.

⁴² Rajendra Prasad to Kannan, 26th September 1957.

Interestingly, none of these national leaders even mentioned Ambedkar, who had a sizeable following like any other political figure in India. For Taylor (1994: 25) “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” This level of distortion, and this degree of erasure and misrecognition is not accidental; it is the result of a biased consciousness of historical leaders, who refused to recognise leaders from the Depressed Classes like Ambedkar. Similarly, Kannan too, received little recognition as a Depressed Classes leader within Kerala's political space. This misrecognition has become extensive as Dalits have been portrayed in Kerala history as passive subjects with no history or autonomy, although having an archival presence. Re-inventing these figures as autonomous individuals may serve in eliciting social memory and historical trajectories of communities.

The politics of India's Depressed Classes was extremely diverse in terms of its worldview and political ideology, and it has not progressed in terms of a single and unified trajectory. Ambedkar became the national leader of the Depressed Classes, but due to the complexities of provincial politics, he was not generally embraced in Malabar. As local contexts, movements, and agenda differed from national politics, it is critical to look beyond Ambedkar, when writing a history of the Depressed Classes in India. Throughout his correspondence with Kannan, Ambedkar stresses the importance of consolidating caste organisations, and gaining support from the South. But Kannan and Munisami Pillai were unable to wield enough political power to demand that caste-divided depressed sections unite under one political umbrella. This estrangement from the people in Kannan's case, hampered Ambedkar's political prospects and accelerated the pace of other political forces that gained traction among Malabar's 'Untouchables'. I contend that the rise of provincial and nationalist politics under colonial rule, influenced the trajectory of the Depressed Classes movement, which in the Malabar progressed through a process of collaboration with the Congress, non-Brahmin, and other lower-caste, and socialist movements.

Finally, regional social formations, production and ownership relations, linguistic characteristics and vernacular diversity, the mode of governance, regional cultural peculiarities, colonial modernity, and the history of social reform, all influenced the ideology of the Depressed Classes movement, shaping its formation and struggles. Therefore, it is important to understand the historical context of these movements before suggesting that the Depressed Classes movement was 'conflicting' or 'divisive'. The response of the Depressed Classes towards British colonialism, nationalism, and shifting provincial politics appears to challenge the depiction of lower-caste movements as pro-government. The politics of recognition is an important aspect here, and is required for an understanding of how “dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated” (Taylor 1994: 66). Therefore, one of the chief interventions of a research article based on intellectual history is to provide a historical context that facilitates a deeper and fine-grained understanding of the struggle for freedom and equality, that cannot be complete without a review of their situated histories.

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