

Book Review

Raja Sekhar Vundru's, 'Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel The Making of India's Electoral System'. Bloomsbury. 2017 .200pp.Rs.499.

In the present scenario there is a global debate prevalent regarding Electoral system reform in different democracies following the different kind of electoral system. Irrespective of the fact that whatever form of electoral system is under practice, the democracies and political scientists are engaged in analyzing the pros and cons of these different forms of electoral systems on the basis that how much they are serving the very purpose of representation. In our country too where we are following First Past the Post (FPTP) system which we inherited from British regime wherein the candidate with largest number of valid votes are declared as winner from a particular parliamentary or legislative constituency irrespective of the fact that he or she secured the majority votes (that is fifty percent plus one vote) from that constituency or not, there is serious debate these days over the representative character of FPTP system. This makes the work of Raja Sekhar Vundru, 'Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel The Making of India's Electoral System'(Bloomsbury,2017), a important book to read.

The book mainly gives an insight on evolution of India's electoral system tracing back its roots from 1937 till now. In this process writer mainly highlights Ambedkar's tryst for separate electorate for Dalits and his contestation with other two tall leaders Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabh bhai Patel and reflection of these all over the current electoral system which we have.

The writer has adopted comparative historical method of research as he has attempted to analyse the historical events like Poona Pact between Ambedkar and Gandhi, discussions of constituent assemblies and role played by leaders like Sardar Patel, Sardar

Nagappa over the evolution of India's electoral system. It also seems that the writer used archival methods as he is referring to the different texts written by Ambedkar like '*What Congress and Gandhi have done to untouchables*', diary of Mahadev Desai who was the personal assistant to Mahatma Gandhi and various others.

The book begins with describing the prime purpose of electoral system to translate the will of the voters into number of legislative body and then classify the different kind of electoral system practiced in various countries broadly into three categories viz : Plurality system which is single member constituencies where representative is elected through First Past the Post like in democracies like India and USA; Majoritarian system is where majority refers to more than fifty percent vote that is fifty percent plus one vote like French presidential election and third is Proportional Representation system under which legislative seats are won by parties in proportion to percentage of votes gained by them. Author also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of all three types of electoral system briefly.

Vundru mentions about the discriminatory social history of the country as a ground for unfolding Ambedkar's demand for a separate electorate of the oppressed class. For outlining the trajectory of India's electoral system he starts from the election of 1937 in British ruled India in which very few people were enfranchised to vote on the basis of their land revenue paying and taxpaying capacities. Vundru captures the process of rise of two towering leaders Ambedkar and Gandhi in Indian politics. And how Ambedkar gradually championed for untouchables civil and political rights since his appearance before Southborough commission where he submitted plea for untouchable representation with a staunch view that dalits do not any other

community or any non-dalit to represent their problems hence Dalit should be allowed to represent their issues themselves.

The book tries to capture the entire episode of Simon commission, round table conferences, its outcome and the open confrontation of Ambedkar with Congress and Gandhi over the issue of separate electorate for dalits. Simon commission appointed by Britishers for Electoral reforms, Congress opposed the simon commission whereas Ambedkar represented on behalf of Dalits and sought for separate electorates for Dalits. The Simon Commission report which came in 1930, recommended continuation of separate electorate for minorities on one hand and for the first time recognized dalits as a distinct political group but no separate electorate was granted for dalits and were allotted reserved seats with Hindus with a special provision that is any dalit can contest election only if he is declared to be fit to do so by the Governor. This clause highly disgruntled Ambedkar. However during this time Congress which was opposing the Simon Commission appointed a committee under Moti Lal Nehru to draft a new Constitution in May 1928, after which the Nehru report came. Nehru report denounced the demand of separate electorate for minorities as well as dalits however it talked about extending the rights to dalits equally.

Actually the major part of the book revolves around the Ambedkar's demand of separate electorate for Dalits which turned the key contention between him congress and Mahatma Gandhi and comprise of the following events: Ambedkar's pursuance for separate electorate in Round Table Conferences, the outcome of round table conference, Gandhi's disapproval to it and going for fast unto death, reconciliation between Ambedkar and Gandhi in Poona Pact and aftermath of it Ambedkar's efforts to compensate what he lost in Poona Pact. Vundru mentions that first round table was quite successful for Ambedkar as he managed convincing there that dalit should be given

representation in seats. However in the Second Round Table Conference where Mahatma Gandhi too participated, confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar arise within the conference where Gandhi denounce any further special representation except for muslims and Sikhs. However the British Government on 17 August 1932 announced the award for minorities and dalits . The British accepted the Ambedkar' suggestion for two votes, one in a separate electorate for dalits and other in a general constituency on a common electoral roll along with hindus. This entire episode irked Gandhi and he went for fast unto death against this communal award. As he saw it as a disintegrating force and especially since he considered schedule castes as an integral part of Hindu religion so he apprehended that it will be a disintegrating factor within Hindus.

Author broadly narrates the discussion between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the issue of separate electorate which finally concluded in the form Poona Pact which brought change into the electoral method of separate electorate and consensus was made on a two stage election process. First, separate primary elections to be held for reserved seats aout of which a panel of first four candidates would go for secondary election. The election of 1937 and 1946 used this Poona Pact method for dalit representation. However Ambedkar saw the outcome and again started pushing to compensate what he has lost in Poona Pact. He proposed to Gandhi again that instead of a two stage election there should be a one time election and schedule caste would poll in two ballot boxes and winning candidate amongst the schedule caste should receive at least 25 percent vote of the community to be declared validly elected. In constituent assembly too Ambedkar advocated for this qualified joint electorate. In the analysis of 1937 election Ambedkar showed that only 18 percent of the votes polled by untouchables were in favor of congress and 82 percent have been against the congress which attacked congress claim of sole representative of untouchables.

Vundru in his book mentions that Ambedkar's idea of qualified joint electorate was thwarted by Sardar Patel who himself was a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Firstly Sardar Patel reacted positively by convincing Gandhi to winning over Ambedkar by granting him a 20 percent valid vote formula (however Ambedkar asked for 25 percent). But later on Patel backed out from it in the letter written by him to Ambedkar on 1st September 1946. After that Ambedkar move to bring in electoral method of 20 percent qualified votes for dalit in reserved constituencies were thwarted every time by Patel. Later in constituent assembly Ambedkar along with one other Congressman Sardar Nagappa moved a resolution proposing that a minimum of 35 percent of votes of his or her own community were to be secured by a schedule caste for his or her valid election. But this resolution introduced by Sardar Nagappa too were withdrawn on the insistence of Sardar Patel.

The new constitution of India , Under Article 325 states that there shall be no separate electoral rolls on the ground of religion, caste, race or sex and Article 326 ensures adult suffrage. And as per Article 330 the constitution have provision for reserved seats for schedule castes and schedule tribes in legislative bodies.

So we can see the trajectory of India's electoral methods and its changes broadly in following : (1.) Two stage election with separate electoral rolls for schedule caste voters with a primary election and secondary election to (2) a two member constituency under joint electorate and then ultimately (3) to a single member reserved constituency. From 1961 onwards single electoral rolls with a joint electorate of both schedule caste and non schedule caste voters under a single member reserved seat became prevalent.

Vundru at the end also try to correlate the present context and support Ambedkar's idea by saying that it is noticed that the representative of reserved constituency are not performing well for enhancement of their communities and their wellbeing, behind

which Vundru sees the pressure of joint electorate and hence concludes that for what Ambedkar feared is actually turning true.

Undoubtedly the author has successfully attempted to describe the different phases of evolution of Indian electoral system in the light of three eminent personalities Ambedkar, Gandhi and Patel. But at the same time it is important to mention that the book gives an impression that he has overemphasized Ambedkar, may be because of similarity of ideas. Also at some stage while reading the book it appears that instead of discussing growth trajectory of the Indian electoral system focus shifted on personality comparison of the three leaders. The book discuss about Ambedkar's backing for separate electorate and Gandhi's and Patel's opposition for it but it almost lacks, however book carries the excerpt of Gandhi-Ambedkar Discussion in Poona Pact which gives some idea about why Gandhi was against it but it was required to be dealt more. As far as Patel is concerned there is very little in the book about the thoughts and ideas of Patel that why he was against separate electorate except just arguing that Patel was a follower of Gandhi. The book also could have in a more debating way to make reader better understand, which should have contain the disadvantage of a separate electorate too along with its advantages.

So at the end it must be said that although author has made an honest attempt to justify the title of the book but at same time it is not the whole picture of the making of India's electoral system but just one dimension of broader canvas of evolution of India's Electoral system.

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