

1 **Elected by Whom? Ambedkar, Separate Electorates, and the Principle of Group**
2 **Authorization.**

3 **Abstract:**

4 B. R. Ambedkar spent more than a decade arguing for separate electorates for the Depressed
5 Classes. He won them in the Communal Award of 1932, lost them within weeks to Gandhi's
6 fast and the Poona Pact, and attacked the reserved-seat system that replaced them for years
7 afterward. Yet in the Constituent Assembly in 1949 he accepted joint electorates and the
8 abolition of separate electorates for the Scheduled Castes. This shift is usually read as a
9 defeat, a pragmatic compromise, or a genuine change of mind. This article argues that all
10 three readings mistake a device for a principle. A close reading of Ambedkar's electoral
11 writings, and in particular of his analysis of the 1937 election returns in *What Congress and*
12 *Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, shows that his objection was never to joint
13 electorates as such, but to any arrangement in which the representatives of the Scheduled
14 Castes were chosen by the caste-Hindu majority rather than by the Scheduled Castes
15 themselves. Separate electorates were the device he judged best able to secure that principle.
16 When the device became unavailable and the franchise was transformed, he accepted a
17 weaker arrangement without giving up the principle behind it. The reinterpretation is modest,
18 but it resolves a puzzle that has long attended the study of Ambedkar's constitutional politics.

19 **Keywords:** B. R. Ambedkar; Separate Electorates; Poona Pact; political representation;
20 Scheduled Castes; Group Authorisation

22 Introduction

23 Between 1919 and 1932, no demand was more central to Ambedkar's public life than the
24 demand that the Depressed Classes elect their own representatives. He pressed it before the
25 Southborough Committee on the franchise, restated it before the Simon Commission, and
26 carried it to the Round Table Conferences in London, where he won the argument. The
27 Communal Award of August 1932 granted the Depressed Classes separate electorates: a fixed
28 number of seats to be filled by voters drawn only from among the Depressed Classes
29 themselves. Within weeks the victory was gone. Gandhi, in Yerwada jail, began a fast unto
30 death against the Award, and Ambedkar, faced with the prospect of Gandhi dying and the
31 retaliation that would follow against a community already at the mercy of caste-Hindu
32 neighbours, signed the Poona Pact of September 1932. The Pact swept away separate
33 electorates and put in their place reserved seats inside the general, joint electorate. Ambedkar
34 never disguised how he regarded the exchange. For the next fifteen years he treated the Poona
35 Pact as a wound, and his 1945 book on Congress and Gandhi is in large part a sustained
36 account of what the joint electorate had done to the political standing of the Scheduled
37 Castes.

38 And then he changed course. In 1949, sitting as chairman of the Drafting Committee,
39 Ambedkar accepted the decision of the Constituent Assembly to abolish separate electorates
40 altogether and to protect the Scheduled Castes through reserved seats within joint electorates.
41 The man who had gone to London to win separate electorates, and who had spent a decade
42 mourning their loss, now presided over the constitutional settlement that ended them for
43 good.

44 This is a real puzzle, and the standard ways of handling it are not quite satisfying. One
45 reading treats the 1949 acceptance as a defeat that Ambedkar absorbed and made the best of:
46 the votes were not there, separate electorates had been tainted by their association with
47 Partition, and a shrewd politician cut his losses. A second reading treats it as pragmatism of a
48 more principled kind: Ambedkar traded a maximal demand for a workable package of
49 safeguards, judging that a reserved seat in hand was worth more than a separate electorate
50 that would never be granted. A third reading, less often stated outright but often implied,
51 treats it as a change of view: the mature Ambedkar of the Constituent Assembly had come to
52 see that separate electorates carried the costs Gandhi had warned of, and had quietly moved
53 on from the position of his younger self.

Each reading captures something true. He did sign the Poona Pact under duress; he was a pragmatic bargainer; and separate electorates had indeed become politically radioactive by the late 1940s. But all three share an assumption that this article means to question. They assume that Ambedkar's commitment was to separate electorates, so that giving them up is the thing to be explained — as loss, as trade, or as growth. Read his electoral writings closely and a different picture emerges. What Ambedkar was committed to was never separate electorates as such. It was a principle about who may legitimately choose the representatives of a subordinated group: that they must be chosen by that group and answerable to it, not installed by the majority that dominates it. Separate electorates were the instrument he thought best secured that principle. The instrument was one thing; the principle was another. Once the two are pulled apart, the 1949 acceptance stops looking like a reversal and starts looking like what it was — the acceptance of a second-best instrument at a moment when the conditions that governed the choice of instruments had changed.

The argument is deliberately limited. It does not claim that Ambedkar built a general theory of representation, or that he anticipated later academic debates, or that his judgments about which instrument to prefer were always correct. Valerian Rodrigues has rightly cautioned against reading Ambedkar's corpus as a single system unfolding toward a fixed end, and the reconstruction offered here is meant to honour that caution: it recovers a principle that recurs across occasional writings, not a doctrine Ambedkar sat down to compose (Rodrigues, 2002). The claim is one claim, defended from the texts: that the principle running through Ambedkar's electoral politics is constant from 1919 to 1949, that his objection to the Poona Pact settlement was an application of that principle rather than a preference for a particular electoral form, and that his acceptance of joint electorates in 1949 is consistent with the principle he held throughout. The payoff is not a new theory but the dissolution of a persistent puzzle, and a clearer view of what Ambedkar actually cared about when he argued about elections.

Historical Development of Ambedkar's Electoral Position

It helps to have the sequence of events clearly in view, because the puzzle depends on the details.

The demand for separate representation was, from the beginning, a demand about the untrustworthiness of the caste-Hindu majority as a representative of the Depressed Classes. In his evidence to the Southborough Committee in 1919, Ambedkar argued that the Depressed

Classes could not be represented by others and needed the means to return men of their own choosing; the point was not cultural distinctiveness but the plain fact that those who had an interest in maintaining the disabilities of the Untouchables could not be relied on to speak for them (Jaffrelot, 2005). The argument matured at the Round Table Conferences, where Ambedkar sought for the Depressed Classes the kind of separate electorate that had already been conceded to Muslims. The Communal Award of 1932 accepted the case, giving the Depressed Classes a set of reserved seats to be filled by separate Depressed Class electorates, alongside the ordinary right to vote in general constituencies, for a period of twenty years (Zelliot, 2013).

Gandhi's response is well known. He regarded separate electorates for the Depressed Classes as a knife aimed at the heart of Hinduism, a device that would wall off the Untouchables from the Hindu fold permanently, and he began his fast to force their withdrawal. The Poona Pact that ended the fast was, in form, a compromise: the Depressed Classes would keep, and even enlarge, their bloc of reserved seats, but those seats would now be filled within the general electorate rather than by a separate one. A system of primary elections was written in to soften the change — Depressed Class voters would first choose, in a primary confined to themselves, a panel of candidates for each reserved seat, and the general electorate would then elect one member of that panel, an arrangement to run for ten years unless ended sooner by agreement (Jaffrelot, 2005). On paper this preserved a measure of Depressed Class choice. In practice, as Ambedkar would insist, the decisive vote — the one that actually returned a member — belonged to the joint electorate, in which the caste Hindus were the overwhelming majority.

The usual scholarly readings of Ambedkar's later reconciliation with joint electorates take their bearings from this compromise. Because the Poona Pact was extracted under the threat of Gandhi's death, it is natural to read everything that followed as damage control, and the 1949 acceptance as its final instalment: Ambedkar making peace with a settlement he had never freely chosen. Because Ambedkar was a formidable negotiator who repeatedly accepted partial gains, it is natural to read 1949 as one more calculated trade. And because separate electorates were, by 1947, widely blamed for the logic that had produced Pakistan, it is natural to suppose that Ambedkar came to share the general revulsion against them. None of these readings is foolish. What they miss is that Ambedkar left a detailed record of *why* he objected to the Poona Pact system, and that this record does not fit the idea that his quarrel was with joint electorates as a form. His quarrel was with what the joint electorate did to the

source of a representative's mandate. To see this, we have to read the reasons he gave, not merely track the positions he held.

Representation and Group Authorization

The steadiest thread in Ambedkar's electoral writing is a claim about authorization — about who confers a representative's mandate and to whom the representative must therefore answer. It is worth separating two things that are easy to run together. One is the question of whether a representative belongs to the group: is the member holding a reserved seat himself a member of the Scheduled Castes? The other is the question of whether the group chose the representative: did the votes that put the member in office come from the Scheduled Castes, or from someone else? Ambedkar's argument turns entirely on the second question, and its force lies in his refusal to let the first question stand in for it.

The reasoning behind the demand for separate electorates is an argument about that second question. In *States and Minorities*, the memorandum he prepared for the Constituent Assembly in 1947, Ambedkar set out the structural fact that made ordinary majority rule dangerous for the Scheduled Castes. The Indian majority, he argued, was not the shifting, issue-based majority that parliamentary theory assumes. "In India," he wrote, "the majority is not a political majority. It is a communal majority" — a bloc held together by community rather than by programme, and therefore fixed rather than rotating (Ambedkar, 1947/2014). This permanence was not an accident of the moment; it was the political face of the caste order Ambedkar had anatomized in *Annihilation of Caste*, a hierarchy that sorted persons by birth and left the Untouchables at the bottom of a structure designed to endure (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Where the majority is of this kind, ordinary elections do not pass power back and forth between changing coalitions; they hand it, permanently, to the same community. Left unchecked, Ambedkar warned, such a system "would make the majority a governing class and the minority a subject class" (Ambedkar, 1947/2014). The reserved seat filled by a joint electorate sits squarely inside this danger. If the caste Hindus are a permanent majority in the constituency, then the votes that decide even a reserved seat are majority votes, and the member who wins them owes his place to the majority.

This is why the demand for separate electorates was, in Ambedkar's hands, an instrumental demand rather than an expressive one. He did not ask for separate electorates because separateness was a good to be cherished, or because the Depressed Classes possessed a heritage that a fair state should help them preserve. He asked for them because a separate

electorate was the one mechanism that guaranteed the answer to the second question: under a separate electorate, and only under it, the votes that returned the representative came from the group itself. The representative of the Depressed Classes would owe his seat to the Depressed Classes, and would therefore have to answer to them. Everything Ambedkar wanted from the arrangement — genuine advocacy, independence from the majority, a representative who could not be disowned by his own constituents because they were the ones who elected him — flowed from that single feature. Separate electorates were valuable for what they secured, not for what they were.

It is useful here to borrow a distinction from the theory of representation, not to import a large apparatus but simply to name what Ambedkar was after. Hanna Pitkin (1967) observed that the most basic, "formalistic" ways of thinking about representation concern its bookends: authorization, which asks who gave the representative the right to act, and accountability, which asks to whom the representative must answer and who can remove him. On this way of putting it, Ambedkar's principle is easy to state. A representative of the Scheduled Castes is genuine only when the Scheduled Castes are the ones who authorize him and the ones who can hold him to account. The form of the electorate matters only as a means to that end. A separate electorate secures it directly. A joint electorate may or may not secure it, depending on whether the group's votes actually decide the seat. The principle is about the source of the mandate; the electorate is merely the machinery through which the mandate is, or is not, delivered.

Holding the principle and the machinery apart is the whole of the argument, and it changes what we should expect to find in Ambedkar's assessment of the Poona Pact. If his commitment were to separate electorates as a form, then any move to joint electorates should draw his fire equally, whatever its results. If his commitment were to the principle, then his objection should track one thing only: whether, under the arrangement in question, the Scheduled Castes' own votes were what put their representatives in office. The 1945 book lets us test this directly, because in it Ambedkar examined the joint electorate not in the abstract but in operation, and told us exactly what was wrong with it.

The 1937 Elections and the Problem of Representation

The decisive evidence for reading Ambedkar's objection as a matter of principle rather than form is his analysis of the first elections held under the new system. The Government of India Act of 1935 brought the Poona Pact arrangement into force, and the elections of 1937 were

the first in which the Scheduled Castes' reserved seats were filled by joint electorates. Ambedkar studied the results, and his verdict is the hinge of this article.

Congress, he noted, had won the great bulk of the reserved seats. But this apparent success was, for him, precisely the proof of failure. The Congress candidates in the reserved constituencies had been carried, he argued, by caste-Hindu votes, "and so do not," he wrote, "in any way represent the Scheduled Castes" (Ambedkar, 1945/2014, p. iii). The sentence repays a slow reading, because everything in the argument depends on the criterion it applies. The men who won these seats were themselves members of the Scheduled Castes; the seats were reserved for them; by the test of group membership they qualified. And by the test of electoral form they qualified too, for they had been returned under the very system the Poona Pact had installed. Yet Ambedkar denied that they represented the Scheduled Castes at all. The reason is that the votes which put them in office were not the community's own. They had been elected by the majority, and so, in the sense that mattered to him, they were the majority's men. That single sentence is not an aside; it distils the argument of the whole book, which returns again and again to the charge that the joint electorate produced Scheduled Caste legislators who depended on caste-Hindu goodwill for their seats.

Notice what this passage is doing and what it is not doing. It is not objecting that the electorate was joint rather than separate as a matter of principle. It is objecting to a concrete result: that the winning coalition in these seats was a caste-Hindu coalition, and that a representative floated into office on majority votes cannot be counted a representative of the minority. The criterion is the source of the mandate. This is exactly the principle reconstructed in the previous section, now applied to a working electoral system and used to condemn it. And the condemnation lands on the joint electorate not because it is joint in name but because, under the franchise then in force, it left the decisive vote with the majority. Ambedkar's complaint is not formal. It is a complaint about who was doing the electing.

The point can be sharpened by pressing on the mechanism. A member returned by caste-Hindu votes depends on caste-Hindu votes to be returned again. His seat is in the gift of the majority, and the ordinary logic of self-preservation directs his conduct toward the people who can keep him or remove him. He is a representative of the Scheduled Castes in form — he sits in their seat, he carries their label — and a representative of the majority in substance, because it is the majority to whom he must answer. This is why Ambedkar could regard the Poona Pact settlement as having reproduced, under a new name, the very problem that

215 separate electorates had been designed to solve. Separate electorates had answered the
216 question "who elects the representative?" in favour of the group. The joint electorate, under
217 the conditions of the 1930s, answered it in favour of the majority. The bloc of reserved seats
218 had grown; the primary election gave Depressed Class voters a preliminary say; and none of
219 it touched the decisive fact, which was that the final and binding vote belonged to the caste
220 Hindus. The primary, in any case, was temporary, a ten-year concession after which even the
221 preliminary filtering would lapse. What remained was a permanent structure in which the
222 majority chose the minority's representatives.

223 Read in this light, the fifteen years of bitterness about the Poona Pact are not the residue of a
224 wounded ego or of nostalgia for a lost victory. They are the expression of a consistent
225 judgment: that the settlement had failed the one test Ambedkar cared about. He was not
226 lamenting a form he happened to prefer. He was recording that the machinery he had been
227 forced to accept did not deliver what representation, on his understanding, required — a
228 representative whom the group itself had chosen and could hold to account. The 1937 returns
229 were the demonstration, and the 1945 book was the brief. Both are governed by the principle,
230 not by an attachment to separate electorates as such.

231 If this reading of the 1945 material is right, it puts the 1949 acceptance in a wholly different
232 light. The question is no longer why Ambedkar abandoned separate electorates, as though he
233 had abandoned a principle. The question is why, holding the same principle, he judged in
234 1949 that a reserved seat inside a joint electorate had become an acceptable instrument, when
235 in 1937 he had judged that it was not. That is a question about the conditions under which the
236 instrument operates, and those conditions had changed in a way that bears directly on the
237 criterion.

238 **The 1949 Settlement and the Continuity of Representational Principle**

239 Two things were different by 1949, and both bear on the choice of instrument rather than on
240 the principle behind it.

241 The first and more important is the franchise. The elections Ambedkar dissected in the 1945
242 book had been held under the restricted franchise of the 1935 Act, which enfranchised only a
243 minority of adults, weighted heavily toward property and education — categories in which
244 the Scheduled Castes were thinly represented. Under that franchise, the Scheduled Caste vote
245 in a general constituency was a small and containable thing, easily swamped by the caste-
246 Hindu electorate around it. The joint electorate therefore delivered the seat to the majority

almost by construction. The Constitution that Ambedkar's committee was drafting adopted universal adult suffrage, and that single change transformed the arithmetic of the reserved seat. Under universal franchise the Scheduled Castes voted in full numbers, and in many constituencies those numbers were large enough to weigh heavily in the outcome of the very seats reserved for them. The instrument that had failed the criterion under a narrow franchise could approximate it far better under a universal one, because the group's own votes now counted for much more in the coalition that returned its representatives. Ambedkar had located the failure of the joint electorate in a specific fact — that the decisive votes were the majority's. Universal suffrage did not abolish that fact, but it reduced it, and it did so precisely along the dimension the principle cares about.

This should not be overstated. Ambedkar did not, so far as the record shows, set out the arithmetic in a neat syllogism and announce that universal suffrage had converted him. The claim is more modest: the change in the franchise gave him a genuine, principled reason to judge the reserved seat differently in 1949 than in 1937, and that reason is continuous with the principle he had held all along. A judgment that a device now works well enough, under changed conditions, is not the abandonment of the standard by which "well enough" is measured. It is an application of that standard to a new situation.

The second difference is blunter and belongs to the politics of the moment. By 1947 separate electorates were no longer a live option in any practical sense. They had come to be seen, across the Assembly and well beyond it, as the mechanism that had hardened communal division into two nations, and the memory of Partition made any proposal to extend them politically impossible. Ambedkar could read a room. A demand for separate electorates in 1949 would not have secured genuine representation for the Scheduled Castes; it would simply have failed, and taken with it the goodwill needed to secure the reserved seats and the other safeguards that were actually attainable. Faced with a device that had become unavailable, he took the best instrument still on the table.

This second consideration, on its own, is enough to dissolve the charge of reversal. A commitment to a principle does not require insisting on an instrument that can no longer be had. If a locksmith's preferred key has been confiscated, his using a different key does not show that he has stopped wanting the door open. To read Ambedkar's acceptance of joint electorates as a change of principle, one has to show that the principle itself changed — that he stopped believing the Scheduled Castes must choose and hold to account their own

representatives. Neither of the two considerations just described requires any such change. The franchise argument says the instrument now serves the principle better; the political argument says the preferred instrument is gone and a lesser one must serve. Both leave the principle exactly where it was.

The texts of 1948 and 1949 support this, because in them Ambedkar continued to treat the underlying danger as real and enduring even as he accepted the joint electorate. When he defended the reservation of seats and posts, he did so in the language of a remedy for a persisting wrong, not of a value to be celebrated. In his speech of 30 November 1948, he argued that reservation had to be "confined to a minority of seats" so that the exception would not swallow the rule of equal opportunity (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948) — the words of a man treating group protection as a bounded corrective, not as a permanent good. Yet on the question of how long the protection should last, he pressed for more time rather than less. During the debates on the reservation of seats, he recorded that he had been prepared to press for a longer period for the Scheduled Castes than the Assembly was willing to grant, and would have given longer still to the tribes (Constituent Assembly of India, 1949). This is not the posture of someone who thought the problem of majority domination had been solved. It is the posture of someone who thought it deep and slow to undo, and who wanted the safeguards to outlast the passing enthusiasm of the moment. The instrument had changed; the reading of the danger had not.

His final address to the Assembly makes the same point at the level of the whole constitutional order. On 25 November 1949, Ambedkar warned that India was about to enter "a life of contradictions," granting political equality while leaving social and economic inequality in place, and that the country must remove this contradiction "at the earliest possible moment" or else those who suffered from inequality would "blow up the structure of political democracy" (Constituent Assembly of India, 1949). The safeguards, on this understanding, answer a contradiction that the republic is charged with removing; they are corrective and, in aspiration, temporary. But the contradiction they answer is precisely the one Ambedkar had diagnosed from the start — a social majority converting its weight into permanent political domination. He accepted a milder instrument for holding that domination in check. He did not decide that the domination had ceased to exist.

Put the three moments together and the shape of the position is clear. In the demand for separate electorates, Ambedkar sought an instrument that would guarantee the Scheduled

311 Castes control over the choice of their representatives. In the critique of the Poona Pact, he
312 condemned a joint electorate that, under a narrow franchise, handed that control to the
313 majority. In 1949 he accepted a joint electorate that, under a universal franchise and in the
314 absence of any alternative, could hold that control closer to the group and was in any case the
315 only instrument available. The instrument moves; the standard against which it is chosen does
316 not. What looks like a reversal is the same principle steering by different means through
317 changed waters.

318 **Objections and Limits of the Instrumental Interpretation**

319 An honest reading has to face the passages that pull the other way, because the instrumental
320 interpretation is not frictionless, and pretending otherwise would weaken it. Two moments in
321 Ambedkar's writing look, at first glance, as though he valued the separateness of the
322 Scheduled Castes for its own sake, which is exactly what the reading here denies.

323 The first is his proposal, in the 1940s, for separate settlements — villages to be inhabited
324 exclusively by Untouchables, physically apart from the caste-Hindu village. On its face this is
325 separateness made concrete, and it sits awkwardly beside the claim that Ambedkar wanted
326 separation only as a means. But the justification he gave was itself instrumental, and pointed
327 at autonomy rather than at separateness as such. The Untouchable's subordination in the
328 shared village, he argued, was rooted in dependence: dependence on caste-Hindu landowners
329 for work, for water, for the necessities of life, a dependence that made resistance suicidal and
330 kept the whole apparatus of untouchability in place. The separate settlement was proposed as
331 a way of breaking that dependence — of giving the Untouchable a base from which he could
332 not be starved into submission. The aim is the same aim that runs through the electoral
333 writings: to free the group from the majority's power over it. One may well doubt that
334 territorial separation was a wise means to that end, and the proposal certainly strains the
335 picture. But it strains it as a questionable instrument in service of autonomy, not as evidence
336 that Ambedkar had come to prize separation for itself.

337 The second is his description of the Scheduled Castes, in an appendix to the 1945 book, as "a
338 distinct and separate element in the national life of India," indeed as a minority in a sense
339 "more real" than the religious minorities to which the term was usually applied (Ambedkar,
340 1945/2014). Taken alone, the language of durable distinctness seems to cut against a project
341 whose long horizon was the disappearance of caste. But read in context the sentence is a
342 claim about the depth of the injury, not about the worth of the separation. Ambedkar's point is

that the Scheduled Castes are more thoroughly excluded than the religious minorities — that their separateness is more complete and more damaging — and that this is a reason they need protection more, not a reason their separateness should be preserved. The separateness he describes is the separateness imposed on the group by the caste order, the very thing his larger project sought to end. To report that a wound is deep is not to wish it permanent.

Neither passage, then, overturns the reading, though the separate-settlements proposal in particular shows that the instrumental interpretation has to work to accommodate everything Ambedkar wrote. The relevant test is whether these moments are better explained as valuing separateness for its own sake or as instruments, however debatable, aimed at freeing the group from the majority's power. On balance they are the latter, and they leave the central claim standing: across the electoral writings, the value that does the work is autonomy from a dominating majority, and separateness appears only ever as a possible means to it.

Conclusion

The demand for separate electorates and the acceptance of joint electorates have long looked like two Ambedkars — the uncompromising champion of the 1930s and the accommodating constitutionalist of the 1940s — and the transition between them has been read as loss, as bargain, or as growth. Reading the electoral writings for their reasons rather than their positions shows a single figure holding a single principle. What Ambedkar wanted was not a particular shape of ballot but an answer to one question: who chooses the representatives of a group that a permanent majority is otherwise positioned to speak for? His answer never varied. The representatives must be chosen by the group and answerable to it. Separate electorates were the instrument he judged best able to deliver that answer, and he fought for them as hard as he fought for anything. When the 1937 returns showed that the joint electorate, under a narrow franchise, delivered the opposite — representatives installed by the majority and beholden to it — he condemned the arrangement in exactly those terms. And when universal suffrage changed the arithmetic and the politics of the moment closed off the alternative, he accepted a joint electorate that could hold the answer closer to the group. The instrument changed three times. The principle did not change at all.

The claim is a limited one, and its limits are worth stating plainly. It does not turn Ambedkar into a systematic theorist of representation; he wrote for occasions, under pressure, and did not pause to erect a general account of the representative relation. It does not settle whether his instrumental judgments were correct — whether separate electorates really were the best

safeguard in the 1930s, or whether the reserved seat has in fact served the Scheduled Castes well under universal franchise, a question on which the later record is at best mixed (Galanter, 1984) and on which others have raised hard doubts about what recognition of this kind does to the recognised (Rao, 2009). It offers no verdict on those debates. What it offers is smaller and, I think, secure: a way of reading a well-known change of position that makes better sense of the reasons Ambedkar actually gave than the readings of reversal, defeat, or trade. Those readings all take his commitment to have been to separate electorates. His commitment was to something underneath them.

The distinction has a modest use beyond the biography. Arguments about the political representation of subordinated groups still tend to run along the axis of institutional form — separate rolls or common ones, reserved seats or open competition, quotas or their absence — as though the form were the thing at stake. Ambedkar's electoral writings are a reminder that the form is downstream of a prior question, and that the prior question is the one worth keeping in view: not "separate or joint?" but "elected by whom?" He kept it in view for thirty years, through victory and defeat and compromise, and it is the thread that makes his shifting positions a single, coherent politics.

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