Separate Electorate

Why in News?

September 20 marks the anniversary of the day Mahatma Gandhi began a fast unto death in Pune's Yerawada Jail in 1932 in protest against the award of separate electorates for Scheduled Castes.

What is separate electorate?

- **Separate Electorate** - It is a system of election to legislatures which divides voters along the lines of their religion or ethnicity or any other to ensure that members of the community can elect their own representatives.
- **Double Voting** - A particular community vote 2 times to elect one from that community and the another to elect for the general electorate.
- **Minorities** - Separate electorates are usually demanded by minorities who feel it would otherwise be difficult for them to get fair representation in government.
- For example, a separate electorate for Muslims means that Muslims will choose their separate leader by separate elections for Muslims.
- **Introduction** – It was introduced first by the Morley Minto reforms of 1909 and Government of India act 1909 for Muslims.
- All the elections to local bodies and Legislative Council from 1909 to 1946 were held on the basis of the separate electorate system.
- **Extension** - Montague Chelmsford reform and Government of India Act 1919 extended the separate electorates for Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans.
- **Communal Award** – It was introduced on August 16, 1932, by the British colonial government under Ramsay MacDonald to grant separate electorates to Marathas, Sikhs, women, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians including the Depressed classes.
- It granted an additional vote in designated special depressed class constituencies for a 20-year term.

Why Ambedkar demanded separate electorate?

- Ambedkar demanded separate electorate for Scheduled communities during the Simon commission reform in 1937.
- **Outcasted Community** –Although depressed classes are included among the Hindus, they were not treated as an integral part of that community.
- **Political Representation** – Separate electorate would ensure political power for depressed class community.
- **Ineffectiveness of Joint Electorate** - While joint electorates might better help integrate lower castes into the Hindu fold, they would do little to challenge their subservient position.
- **Influence of Majority** - Under joint electorate system, Majority may influence the

election of the representatives of the Dalits community and disabled them fighting oppression against the tyranny of the majority.

Why Gandhi opposed Separate electorate?

- **Ineffectiveness of Separate electorate** – Gandhi held that system of separate electorate would not address the issues of oppressed.
- **Larger Interest** – Gandhi advocated that rather than being restricted to just this measly share of seats, lower castes should aspire to rule the kingdom of the whole world.
- **Weakening Hindu Society** – Gandhi believed that Separate electorate system would destroy Hinduism by driving a wedge within the community.
- If separate electorates for lower castes were announced in addition to those for Muslims, this would significantly reduce the power that caste Hindu leadership enjoyed by breaking the consolidated Hindu fold.
- **British Exploitation** –It was a divide and rule system by the British to exploit the internal divisions in Indian society for their own purposes.

What was the Poona Pact?

- **Gandhi's Fast** – on September 1932, at the Yerawada Central Jail in Pune Mahatma Gandhi began fasting unto death against the award of separate electorates to the Scheduled Castes.
- **Poona Pact** – It is an agreement between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi on the political representation of the Depressed Classes.
- It was signed on 24 September 1932 by 23 representatives, including Madan Mohan Malaviya on behalf of Hindus, and Gandhi and Ambedkar representing the depressed classes.
- The Pact contained various provisions for political representation, primary election system, educational grants
- **Reservation** – Instead of Separate electorate, seats were reserved for the Depressed Classes from the general electorate across various provinces.
- 18% of the seats in the Central Legislature were reserved for the Depressed Classes.
- **Joint Electorate** - Elections to these reserved seats were to be conducted through joint electorates.
- **Primary Election Method** - All members of the Depressed Classes listed in the general electoral roll of a constituency would collectively form an electoral college.
- This electoral college would then choose a panel of four candidates for each reserved seat through a single vote method.
- The top four candidates in the primary elections would become the final candidates for the general electorate's consideration.
- **Franchise** - The Franchise for the Central and Provincial Legislatures of the Depressed Classes was based on the Lothian Committee Report.

Lothian Committee recommended qualified version of universal suffrage that entailed a literacy test to elect members to the provincial legislatures.

- **Duration** - System of primary elections for panel candidates would conclude after the first ten years, unless terminated earlier by mutual agreement
- **Educational Grant** - A portion of the educational grant was earmarked to provide adequate educational facilities specifically for members of the Depressed Classes.

Reference

The Indian Express | Ambedkar and Gandhi on separate electorate

