

# THE COMMUNAL AWARD AND GANDHI

By BERNARD HOUGHTON

**O**F the numerous safeguards for British rule in India contrived by the Labour Ministers and endorsed by their successors, few are more important than the division of the electorate into water-tight compartments. Even with the limited enfranchisement of the Lothian Committee, elections conducted in the usual manner might result in Councils which would hinder and not assist the smooth running of the real dictatorship of Whitehall. Before everything it was essential to prevent elections on a straight national ticket, an issue which might unite all classes in an insistent demand for independence. The artificial division of the electorates has therefore from the commencement been a keynote of imperialist strategy. Nor was this a difficult task. Thanks to its isolation by mountains and the sea, long stationary Hindu society has crystallised into castes, precisely as in similar circumstances did that of ancient Egypt. The original division, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra corresponded with the priestly, royal, mercantile and slave divisions of Egypt. Through untold centuries of humble devotion, the Hindu religion, so necessary for landlordism, has for toilers and bourgeoisie alike become bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. Mingled with the mass of 220 million Hindus are some 70 million Moslems, sequelæ of the Tartar invasions, who profess a religion notorious for its bigotry and its fanaticism.

Could anything be more providential? As Sir John Strachey long ago pointed out, "the existence side by side of hostile creeds amongst the Indian people is one of the strong points in our political position in India." Communal electorates for the Moslems were accordingly established and the principle of divide and rule accepted as an integral part of representative government.

Accordingly at the first Round Table Conference we find the principles of electorates for religious communities further extended by representation for the Sikhs, Indian Christians and the Depressed Classes. By this manœuvre the Government hoped not only to paralyse the new Councils when formed, but to weaken and confuse the National Congress in the present struggle. At this Conference, too, the plan of the Labour Government stood plainly revealed. It was, firstly, to baffle the national movement by artificial divisions in the electorate; secondly, under the name of Federation to dilute heavily the Chambers at Delhi with British liegemen, the Princes; and thirdly, by means of safeguards such as

control of the army, foreign affairs and finance and dictatorial powers for the Viceroy, to reduce the whole Constitution to a farce. Such a scheme affords not even the pretence of self-government; in practice it would retain power in British hands every whit as securely as at present. Yet Gandhi after skilful intrigues at Karachi, attended the second Conference as the sole representative of the National Congress, with this plan staring him in the face, although at Lahore and, less certainly, at Karachi, he had publicly pledged himself to independence. (In private he had informed Lord Irwin that he would not raise this issue). He accepted the plan of electorates by religion, though he boggled at certain details, particularly separate representation for the Untouchables.

After floods of vague rhetoric, in which Gandhi bore his part, the Conference broke up on the rock of the Moslem electorate. The Shaukat Ali Moslems, alone nominated by the Viceroy, like the Ulstermen in 1921, understood their importance in the British scheme, and they pitched their demands accordingly. The Government would have much preferred an agreement amongst the delegates, for such an agreement would have given the appearance of national approval to this important part of their scheme. As it was there was nothing for it but to decide the matter *ex cathedra*, a task which Sir S. Hoare tactfully referred to Mr. MacDonald.

On his return to Bombay, Gandhi, who with his backers, the Ahmedabad mill-owners, desired to continue negotiations, was almost immediately interned in Yervada Jail under a *lettre de cachet*. The new Secretary of State, Sir S. Hoare, by no means saw eye to eye with his predecessor or with the Labour Ministry. By temperament he is a plain, blunt man, having no use for the hypocrisy which filled so large a portion in the Indian speeches of Messrs. Benn and MacDonald. Ideologically the latter is a close analogue to Mr. Gandhi; Sir S. Hoare is his antithesis. In policy together with the Conservative majority, the latter stands for the iron hand; he will not brook even the appearance of equality with Indians; it is for Britain to dictate, for India to submit—such is his considered opinion. He cut Mr. Gandhi short at Bombay as summarily as when at the Conference he had intervened after the latter's "silken cords" speech. Unconditional surrender is his demand; only on its knees will he speak with the Congress.

Upon India now descended a reign of coercion excelling even that directed by the "socialist" Mr. Benn. Nationalists of all classes were imprisoned in tens of thousands; the Press was heavily gagged; government by ordinance obliterated all personal liberty, whilst the bombing of their homes explained to the tribesmen on the N.W. frontier what British civilisation means. At length in July Mr. MacDonald found time, in an interval between conferences, to make his communal award. The Backward Areas apart, it divided the electorate into upwards of

twelve separate categories, some with dual votes. The award is indeed a *reductio ad absurdum* of the principle of divide and rule; officialdom would seem to have ridden its hobby to death. There is even a separate electorate for women, which proves incidentally that Mr. MacDonald and his advisers are lacking in a sense of completeness; surely they should have gone on to subdivide the women's electorates into married and single. Apart from the European community, the award pleased few in India. The Sikhs in particular were exasperated; many Moslems opposed it on principle; the Hindus perceived clearly all that it implied. It is unlikely that so preposterous a scheme will ever even reach Parliament.

Both at the Conference and in March Mr. Gandhi had declared that he would resist with his life any attempt to split the Hindu vote by an electorate for the depressed classes. After another warning in August, which elicited a conciliatory letter from the Premier, he commenced to fast on the 20th September. The Hindu religion, it should be noted, holds self-suffering as the supremest of virtues. Of old, *tapas* (austerities) were believed to mould even the gods to one's will; to sit *dharna*, to fast, at a debtor's door in order to induce payment is held to be so potent as to be prohibited by law. Gandhi has affirmed that "if we suffer enough, the suffering must result in converting the administrators." The effect of the fast was electrical; all India was on tenterhooks even though, with Mr. Gandhi's dietary, he might probably have fasted long without evil results. Dr. Ahmedkar for the Untouchables and sundry Hindu notables hurried to Yervada, and within a week an agreement was come to. It provided a joint Hindu electorate, with seats ear-marked for the Untouchables much in excess of those allotted in the Government scheme. The Government, concealing its chagrin at this impairment of its plan, approved it with a simulated pleasure. But when Gandhi used the occasion to frame with Mr. Jayakar fresh proposals for negotiations, silence again enveloped him. Sir S. Hoare is immovable; he will not bargain with the Congress.

That through the agreement between Dr. Ahmedkar and the orthodox leaders, Gandhi has initiated a great social reform is certainly true. Untouchability is an abomination only possible in a long stagnant agricultural society such as exists in India, a society which by its divisions has helped so powerfully to maintain British rule. But he has achieved this success not on public, but on religious grounds—"for me the matter is one of pure religion." The effect of his fast and its result is therefore to accentuate still further this factor in the Indian scene. It gives fresh life to those ideas which, elsewhere moribund, yet retain so strong a grip on the Indian masses, darkening their minds, destroying their self-respect, and splitting them into a hundred factitious compartments. Whatever its immediate results may be for the depressed classes, it is

therefore a retrograde step, which it were better had never been made. Not by any zeal of philanthropic effort will the crudities of religion disappear from India ; they will vanish only under Socialism before the tractor and the factory machine.

Moreover—and this is vital—Gandhi's action throughout implies acceptance of the imperialist plan. He does not seek to smash the framework of the proposed constitution ; on the contrary he works and schemes entirely within that framework with its communal electorates. Thus, like all reformist manœuvres, his exploit serves merely to strengthen the system which in name—and in name only—he has set out to destroy. This is in line with the Delhi pact, his decision to attend the Round Table Conference, and with the aims of the Bombay and Ahmedabad bourgeois, who most emphatically do not want independence. If, then, the Imperialists regret the weakening of their scheme by the elision of an important electorate, they have good grounds for satisfaction in the tightening of religion's grip over India.

The present tactics of Mr. Gandhi are on all fours with his procedure in 1922 when he commenced the civil disobedience movement by the illicit manufacture of salt on the sea-coast. Thereby he sought to divert a mass movement for non-payment of revenue and rent to a minor issue, the evil of the salt tax. So now he seeks to divert the energies of a movement for political and hence mental freedom to a religious issue, to strengthening the very bond that strangles the mind of the masses. Now, as formerly, the whole plan of Mr. Gandhi and his backers is to deflect a revolutionary movement into purely reformist channels. He has expressly disclaimed Socialism, yet Socialism can alone save the masses with their poverty, their starvation and their misery.

It is not necessary to impugn this piety. But, like all religious people, he is vague in thought, shifty in argument, prone to invent spiritual motives for the very material interests that use him as their tool. His speeches and his writings are replete with every sophism known to logic, and probably with others not yet classified. With the deepening of the Indian crisis Mr. Gandhi, like the Socialists and Labourites elsewhere, must inevitably ally himself yet more openly with the landlords and the bourgeoisie and accept Imperialism subject to the modifications they require.