Gandhi and the Round Table Conference: A Reappraisal

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ABSTRACT

Colonial Britain had organised three Round Table Conferences in an attempt to untangle the communal question in India and steer the country towards a constitutional settlement. Gandhi had attended the second Round Table Conference representing the people of India under the aegis of the Indian National Congress. It is generally understood that at the conference Gandhi failed to solve the tangle of Hindu – Muslim question and returned empty handed to India. However, such reflections were indicative of colonial design to divert attention of Indians because not one but two issues remained unresolved at the conference attended by Gandhi. One was the largely known Hindu – Muslim question and the other, lesser known, was the fate of the Depressed Classes. This paper argues that Gandhi was acutely aware of the colonial design to keep India divided in order to prolong the British rule in India. He quit the Round Table Conference in its second session and returned to India more strengthened than before after having exposed the British meditated agenda to foster undiluted communalism in the form of religious and caste divide.

Keywords – Gandhi, Ambedkar, Round Table Conference, Depressed Classes, Hindus, Untouchables,

The Round Table Conference (RTC), organised between 1930-32, was a feature of colonial India when the Civil Disobedience Movement was in full swing. As Gandhi spearheaded the movement, with an appeal for Swaraj or self-rule, its success took the colonial government by surprise. The British, however, did not seem to be in a defeatist mood. They organised the RTC to diffuse the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement, but without success. The colonial viewpoint assiduously fostered the idea that the RTC, a "peace" conference,[1] was a failure due to communal antagonism among Indians, as they could not reach an amicable settlement on communal problem by themselves.[2] It is also generally believed that Gandhi returned "empty-handed" from the RTC.[3] However, such impressions are reflective of inordinate colonial designs to divert attention from those colonial imperatives that prolonged British rule in India. The reality was that not one, but two issues remained unresolved at the RTC – (a) the Hindu-Muslim question, and (b) the fate of the Depressed Classes,[4] as the 'Untouchables' were then officially called. While the British government harped on the theme of Hindu-Muslim disagreements at the RTC, the fact was that it created more difficulties for India so far as the Depressed Classes were concerned. Gandhi refused to be part of this exercise. He quit the RTC in its second session, the only session he attended, and returned to India more strengthened in his resolve than before to continue his fight against the colonial rule, unjustifiably holding India to the empire. This paper argues that Gandhi was able to understand the peremptory political design of the RTC, and, he was also able to expose the British meditated agenda of fostering undiluted communalism.

The RTC was organised as a series of three sessions, all held in London. The first session was conducted from 12th November, 1930 to 19th January, 1931. It is said that it came closest to the ideal of a RTC, with Indians sitting along with their British counterparts trying to find solutions to a number of problems concerning their own country and Great Britain.[5] Gandhi was not directly part of this session with Indian National Congress (INC) boycotting it, but he wrote and gave his opinion on the session's

[1] William Wedgwood Benn, 'The Indian Round Table Conference', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Mar., 1931), p. 155.
[2] Government of India, East India (Constitutional Reforms), *Communal Decision*, London, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1932.
[3] Sushila Nayar, *Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 7, *Salt Satyagraha: The Watershed*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1995, p. 406.
[4] The 'Depressed Classes' in British India were known by various names such as Antyaj, Bhangi, Dhed, Panchama, Pariah, Dalit, Harijan, Scheduled Castes and Untouchables. The terms denoted their status as outcastes in the Hindu caste hierarchy. The British Government used the category Depressed Classes before 1935 in official records and the term is used to express the same context.
[5] Benn, 'Round Table Conference', p. 147.

outcome. The second session of the RTC was held between 7th September, 1931 and 1st December, 1931. It is said to have begun and conducted with deep seriousness with Gandhi participating in it as the sole representative of the INC.[6] The third, and the final, session held from 17th November, 1932 to 24th December, 1932 was short, and, has been defined more as a consultative exercise among delegates. Gandhi was not part of the third session. So far as India was concerned, this session was inconsequential.

The RTC was meant to show that the British were in effect attempting to remove Indian suspicions that the government was not serious about granting 'Dominion Status' or 'Responsible Government' as well as to make the constitution for the future of India. The British also wanted Indians to believe that their intentions were righteous in projecting the RTC as the building block of constitutional reforms. Treating this as its ultimate goal, the colonial government invited chosen delegates for the RTC from British India and Britain. Among these were the British Prime Minister, as also leaders from different British political parties.[7] The nominated delegates from British India came from Princely States, primarily the titled persons, the bulwarks of the British Raj – a galaxy of Rajas, Nawabs, Dewans, Rao Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs.[8] Other delegates represented select communities and political bodies from British India. The Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees, Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians, Liberals, Domiciled Europeans, Labour, Women, Commercial interests, and the Depressed Classes, were all part of the medley.[9] Few also attended the sessions in non-official capacity.[10] Forming a cohort of 50-60 delegates, a mere 0.001 per cent of millions in India, it was difficult to envision that they all represented India. Nevertheless, the British seemed hopeful of an affable atmosphere at the RTC in the belief that its chosen delegates, the most able advocates of the time, would come to grips with what the government considered to be serious constitutional issues. With this backdrop, the British set the agenda of the sessions and decided the questions of priority, which the delegates were obligated to follow. The RTC was formally inaugurated by the King of England, King George the Vth on 12th November, 1930, in the Royal Gallery, House of Lords.[11] This was the time when in India Gandhi was in jail, along with other INC leaders.[12]

The first session of the RTC treated as a "constitutional feast," was looked at with lot of optimism by the delegates.[13] The London newspapers reported of a hopeful atmosphere as the delegates assured the government of co-operation. The Muslim delegates like Sir Muhammad Shafi believed that "India will come into her own as His Majesty's Dominion."[14] Opening with a plenary discussion, the session was divided into nine sub-committees with members meeting a number of times, following the conference procedures that ensured due consideration to the general view of the delegates. The sub-committees discussed many topics – the Princely State's proposed federal structure, the provincial constitutions, centre's responsibility, executive responsibility to the legislature, defence, services, labour, women, commercial interests, the North-West Provinces, Sind, franchise, and issues of minorities.[15] Of these, Indians treated the Franchise Sub-Committee and the Minorities Sub-Committee as very crucial.

The Franchise Sub-Committee met first and in this the Depressed Classes leaders, Diwan Bahadur Rettamalai Srinivasan and Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, took the opportunity to put forward their case with demands that their community be identified as distinct in any electoral arrangement, and that weightage be given to them based on their population and consideration of disabilities existing against them. These demands were accompanied by a proviso on which the two delegates were insistent, that is, grant of "adult franchise" in favour of Depressed Classes. Ambedkar declared these to be necessary if 'joint electorates' were to work for mutual support between communities.[16] Most Indian delegates were in complete agreement with these demands though the government noted the opposition of Hindu Mahasabha members, but attempted to downplay it by stipulating that "ultimately they too will have to

[6] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (*CWMG*), Vol. 47, Delhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956-94, pp. 271-75.
[7] Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference: Proceedings, 12th November 1930 – 19th January 1931*, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1931, pp. 5-9.
[8] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 22nd September 1930.
[9] *The Times of India*, 12th September 1930.
[10] *The Times of India*, 24th September 1930.
[11] *Indian Round Table Conference: Proceedings*, p. 7.
[12] Bipan Chandra, et al, India's *Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin Books,1989, pp. 274, 279.
[13] *The Times of India*, 2nd September 1930.
[14] *The Times of India*, 27th November 1930.
[15] *Indian Round Table Conference: Proceedings*, pp. 1-3.
[16] Government of India, *Indian Statutory Commission: Selections from Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials*, Vol. XVI, Part I, London, Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1930, pp. 52-61.

give in."[17] As it happened, the Franchise Sub-Committee recommended a higher and a restricted franchise based on property and educational qualifications, raising the number of electors from just 10% to a mere 25% of the total Indian population, and simultaneously declaring that "adult franchise" for Indians was an ultimate goal to be attained by the British in future. Importantly, the committee retained communal form of representation by recommending implementation of franchise in a manner that each minority community was to be given a voting strength in proportion to its numbers.[18]

To both Ambedkar and Srinivasan, these recommendations were of profound implications as majority of their community members did not own land and were not educated. The government's intentions seemed clear; it had not accepted Ambedkar and Srinivasan's demands. The two leaders then looked to other committees to pursue their case. They were joined by Indian delegates including Narayan Malhar Joshi, Benegal Shiva Rao, Kanakarayan Tiruselvam Paul, and Bhaskarrao Vithojirao Jadhav, representing liberals, labour, Indian Christians, etc., all dissenting from the majority decision of the Franchise Sub-Committee. The dissenters wanted that extension of franchise in future be laid down in the constitution itself.[19] After this, the scenario shifted to the Minorities Sub-Committee.

The restricted franchise became the basis for discussions, deliberations, and demands in the Minorities Sub-Committee where the sessions were dominated by the Hindu-Muslim question, with Muslim representatives insistent that other delegates recognise the distinction between status and constitution.[20] They wanted no other alternative but separate electorates where they constituted minority, and demanded its retention in provinces where they also formed the majority with an additional focus on weightage to be given based on their population numbers. Muslim representatives were refusing to consider the need for adjustment of the claims of the Sikhs and the Hindus, the two influential minorities in the Punjab and Bengal. It was no use talking platitudes pronounced the Sikhs, who formed an influential community in the central and canal districts of the Punjab, also in the military, education, and so on. They were refusing to budge.[21] The Hindus seemed prepared to compromise with Muslims in the minority provinces, but not where they formed a majority. "I do not read this language; I do not interpret this language," is how a Hindu representative responded to the Muslim claims in the Punjab and Bengal.[22] The stalemate occurred and it became easy for the British to announce the failure of the RTC on communal grounds.

It is important not to omit but to highlight that Depressed Classes formed an important part of the Minorities Sub-Committee, where they submitted a memorandum of their demands having failed to achieve these in the Franchise Sub-Committee. The memorandum contained their demands for equal citizenship, equal rights, with laws against social boycott, legal protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the services, police, military and redressal laws. On the method of representation, their stated objective was to have "adult suffrage" with joint electorates, along with "fundamental rights" for emancipation from social curse, discrimination and persecution.[23] Significantly, the memorandum had a clause which Ambedkar addressed to the government, "if you do not give 'adult suffrage' then we must claim separate electorates."[24] This demand was to be a temporary expedient, for ten years, to be followed by joint electorates with reservation of seats and adult franchise in favour of the Depressed Classes. Nobody in the Minorities Sub-Committee objected to or rejected the memorandum. When Ambedkar presented his case, majority delegates responded to it in 'complete agreement'. But then, Ambedkar made one observation that seemed to portend what was to follow in future sessions. Ambedkar demanded "complete partition between ourselves and Hindus".[25]

While some Hindu delegates left this issue on the conscience of the Depressed Classes leaders to decide their future in India, the British proceeded to make the demand a side path to separate the Depressed Classes from the Hindu majority. The official RTC report of the first session had a clear recommendation for the British government – to adequately consider the claims of the Depressed Classes

[17] *The Times of India*, 27th November 1930.
[18] Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference: 12th November 1930 – 19th January 1931 – Proceedings of Sub-Committees*, Vol. VI, *Sub-Committee No. VI (Franchise)*, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1931, pp. 177-80.
[19] *Indian Round Table Conference*, Vol. VI, p. 180.
[20] Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference: 12th November 1930 – 19th January 1931 – Proceedings of Sub-Committees*, Vol. III, *Sub-Committee No. III (Minorities)*, Calcutta, Central Publication Branch, 1931, p. 45.
[21] Bal Ram Nanda, *Road to Pakistan: The Life and Times of Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, London, Routledge, 2010, pp. 142, 145-46.
[22] *Proceedings of Sub-Committees*, Vol. III, *Sub-Committee No. III (Minorities)*, p. 106.
[23] *Ibid.*, Appendix II, pp. 168-76.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

as the basis of electoral arrangement.[26] The government consequently accepted to recognise the Depressed Classes as a 'distinct' community, that is, a minority, but minus their demand for "adult franchise". The British, conscious of the political expediency, were keenly aware that Ambedkar was not the sole leader among the Depressed Classes, and that the INC too had support among the Depressed Classes.[27] The government apprehended that granting "adult franchise" could lead to the launch of mass contact programme on both sides, and, in such a scenario, the INC was likely to emerge as a more powerful force and with a stronger mass base. Not conceding to gamble on such propositions, the colonial state chose to adjourn the RTC sine die, dimming British hopes of forming a Depressed Classes contingent against the Indian National Movement.

Thus, the colonial imperative was to call the second session of the RTC and this emerged out of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March, 1931) when the government released Gandhi from prison, along with other prominent leaders. The British then extended an olive branch to the INC and invited it to attend the RTC. The INC chose to send Gandhi as its sole representative to the second session.[28] Gandhi's inspiring leadership during the Civil Disobedience Movement, which valiantly challenged the colonial rule, and, his widely held image as a unifier became the compelling reasons favouring his selection.

Before joining the RTC, Gandhi had put a question mark on the viability of the first session. He sent cables to the London newspapers asking, "if Conference has really offered freedom to India, the reaction should have been felt here."[29] He pointed to the continuing black repression in India, while the RTC was in session, with unprovoked assaults on innocent people who were deprived of their lands and resources, with people's processions forcibly dispersed and people kicked with boots.[30] Gandhi seemed more certain to not surrender his fundamental position at the RTC about gaining complete freedom for India, and, maintaining to represent one India vis-à-vis the colonial government. However, some returning delegates from England did not touch pace with Gandhi. Sir Chetpat Pattabhirama Ramaswami Aiyar, for example, condemned the Civil Disobedience Movement as the cause for India's failure at the RTC.[31] The Muslim leaders, in particular, seemed in recalcitrant mood as their delegates had failed to secure separate electorates in the Punjab and Bengal. Shaukat Ali targeted Gandhi directly in press statements for favouring joint electorates, a stand in line with that of the INC – "if Gandhi wanted civil war, why not test our mettle today."[32]

Unlike the responses of such leaders, the Depressed Classes delegates seemed buoyed with hope because the British had agreed to recognise their community as 'distinct' in any future constitution of India. But these leaders on their return were received with mixed responses. While many Depressed Classes associations gave special recognition to both Ambedkar and Srinivasan in supporting separate electorates, there were some others who raised black flags and criticism.[33] And, once the country came to know that Gandhi had agreed to represent India at the RTC, hopes were raised among many, including the Depressed Classes. Many of their associations sent telegrams to Gandhi, "[expecting] much from you … request you to advocate special privileges through separate electorates."[34] Ambedkar himself expressed the view that Gandhi should see to it that "the constitution of which he will be a party will be a thoroughly democratic one."[35]

Ambedkar also sought a personal meeting with Gandhi where both leaders appeared optimistic about sharing each other's viewpoint. For both, the question of Depressed Classes was to be vivisected through conscience. While Ambedkar penetratingly admitted to Gandhi, "I have no homeland," an obvious reference to his inhuman treatment as an outcaste in India, Gandhi said in similar vein, "of course you have a homeland, you are a patriot of sterling worth."[36] Gandhi's reply was a reflection of his own beliefs and efforts to commit untouchability to flames, after having overcome caste prejudices from an

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
[27] Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, Ch. 3.
[28] 'Speech at A.I.C.C. Meeting, Bombay', 8th August 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 47, pp. 271-75.
[29] *The Indian Review*, Vol. 32, Madras, G. A. Natesan & Co., 1931, p. 192.
[30] 'Cable to "Daily News", London', 3rd February 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 45, p. 148.
[31] *The Times of India*, 3rd February 1931.
[32] Nipendra Nath Mitra, (ed.), *The Indian Annual Register: An Annual Digest of Public Affairs of India*, Vol. 1, Calcutta, The Annual Register Office, January-June 1931, pp. 284-89.
[33] Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1996, p. 104.
[34] Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948*, New Delhi, Penguin, 2018, p. 377.
[35] *The Times of India*, 28th February 1931.
[36] Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, 4th Edition, New Delhi, Popular Prakashan, 2015, p. 166.

early age considering these to be the greatest blot on Hinduism.[37] When Ambedkar stated that "I am striving to win human rights for my people," Gandhi held that "political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindus would be absolutely suicidal."[38] That said, both parted company, but Gandhi kept the window of negotiations open and met other Depressed Classes leaders like Palwankar Baloo, known to be a close friend and an admirer of Ambedkar, and, some other community leaders known to view separate electorate as a hindrance in the progress towards nationalism like P. N. Rajbhoj.[39]

At the RTC, Gandhi was a new face among the delegates, which had the largest contingent of Muslim representatives, with Ambedkar and Srinivasan continuing to represent Depressed Classes, along with representatives from Indian Princely States. The second session began with the British Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald's inaugural address that set the tone for the conference. He wanted the delegates to devise a system of political representation whereby power could be shared equitably between different classes, different communities and different religious groups *before* proceeding to work on the constitution for India.[40] This made the British prerogative very clear – first solve the communal problem and then the government would work on the constitution. This made Gandhi alert right at the beginning about British policy makers placing their hopes on the eternity of the communal question to continue their control over India. When his turn came to speak in the Federal Structure Committee of the second session, he did not play right into the hands of the colonial rulers. Gandhi spoke at length and without hesitation that he was carrying the mandate of the INC, the largest national party of the time, which represented "no particular community, class or interest."[41] He was emphatic that like the INC he stood for one and indivisible India and that he would settle for nothing less than the freedom of India.[42] Gandhi also touched upon separate electorates and was candid in stating that these were bad for the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus as these divided the nation.[43] But he frankly admitted that the INC had reconciled to the special treatment of the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh tangle because of historical reasons, simultaneously making it explicit that the INC would not agree to extend the doctrine in any shape or form. His speech ended with a bolder statement, specifying that he would "most strongly resist grant of special representation to any other community be it Anglo-Indians, Indian Christians or the Depressed Classes," although he sharply stated that he wanted to see the Depressed Classes in the legislatures.[44] The speeches of Gandhi and Ramsay MacDonald became the baseline for the session, but also contributed to widen the gulf between Gandhi and some minority community members, principally, the Depressed Classes.

The focus then shifted to the Minorities Sub-Committee with the British Prime Minister as its Chairman. He announced right in the beginning of the first meeting that the committee was strictly limited to the considerations of the 'minority problem', with many difficulties to solve. The Indian delegates, however, wanted the meeting to be adjourned because some members informed that conversations were going on among the delegates and they wanted these to have a chance to be heard. Sir Muhammad Shafi said that Gandhi intends to meet Muslim representatives. While the issue was being considered, some minority members like Ambedkar, Henry Gidney and Rao Bahadur Pannir Selvam raised objections.[45] Ambedkar, in particular, became suspicious that Gandhi may settle with Muslims, leaving the Depressed Classes high and dry. He was forceful about his apprehension, "those who are negotiating ought to understand that they are not plenipotentiaries at all and they are not in a position to bind us, certainly not."[46] He was immediately supported by the Chairman, Ramsay MacDonald, though the meeting was adjourned.

The Minorities sub-committee meeting was adjourned a second time, this time requested by Gandhi himself who found the previous adjournment too short to even exchange views. The adjournment request was supported by the Sikh and Muslim representatives, but other minorities again looked for assurances. Ambedkar, supported by Gidney and Pannir Selvam, doubted that Gandhi may informally enter into agreed solution with the Sikhs and Muslims, by-passing other minorities. They believed that

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[37] See, Sujay Biswas, 'Gandhi's Approach to Caste and Untouchability', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 46, No. 9-10, (September-October 2018), pp. 71-90.
[38] Keer, *Dr Ambedkar*, p. 167.
[39] *The Bombay Chronicle*, 21st October 1931.
[40] Government of India, *Indian Round Table Conference (Second Session): Proceedings of the Federal Structure Committee and Minorities Committee, 7th September, 1931 – 1st December, 1931*, London, His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1932, pp. 525-26.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[43] 'Speech at Friends' House', 31st October 1931, *CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 258.
[44] *Indian Round Table Conference (Second Session)*, p. 61.
[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 526-27.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 526.

they had reason to doubt Gandhi, because he had given them no assurances the night before when they met him. Even though Hindu Mahasabha member, Madan Mohan Malviya, tried to allay such apprehensions by arguing that Gandhi may have conciliation of the two communities in mind, and with Muhammad Shafi asking Ambedkar and others to shun fears, Ambedkar remained intensely doubtful about Gandhi's intentions.[47] Ambedkar persisted, "I am to be left out in the cold if this internal adjustment is to be utilised for the purpose of solving Hindu-Muslim-Sikh question only." This warranted an explanation from Gandhi, he tried to explain that he can act only as a messenger of peace and that his own opinion would carry no greater weight against the opinion of anybody else, "it is for you to reject or accept these opinions."[48] The goal before the delegates was hazy, but Gandhi held conviction that there were ways and ways of guaranteeing protection to every single interest. The Chairman adjourned the meeting again, this time for a longer duration.

The Minorities sub-committee reconvened after a week but, on a sordid note with Gandhi expressing deep sorrow, and, humiliation for not having solved the communal question through informal meetings.[49] The divergences of views and opinions among the representatives were so great that no formula for agreement could be worked out. If at all, the Muslims had stiffened their attitude in favour of separate electorates, and weightage on population basis in the Punjab and Bengal, without which they were not agreeing to responsibility at the centre in a federation.[50] Gandhi became acutely conscious of the role of nationalist Muslims in the national movement who were not invited at the RTC. But it was the response of the Depressed Classes that surprised Gandhi as they did not show a compromising attitude. They believed that Gandhi was favouring Muslims, also Sikhs, over the Depressed Classes.[51] What pained Gandhi more was their negation of him as a protector of the rights of the Depressed Classes. Gandhi was known not only as an open rebel against the practice of untouchability but had made removal of untouchability the central plank of Indian politics, necessary to attain Swaraj.[52] In the meeting, Gandhi elaborated on INC's settlement proposal aimed to protect Depressed Classes interests through "adult suffrage" and "fundamental rights" by having these embodied in the constitution.[53] Gandhi also demanded that the British government should bring out a drastic criminal law against so-called superior classes which make persecution of the Depressed Classes possible.[54] But Ambedkar repudiated the argument and announced no confidence in the INC-led movement. Although he acknowledged that there may be people in the INC with sympathy towards the Depressed Classes, but he forswore that Depressed Classes were not in the INC.[55] Ambedkar preferred to treat INC synonymously with Hindus.

To Gandhi, however, the British were a greater threat. He was aware that the British would use minority quarrels at the RTC as a reason for indefinitely postponing the constitution, and, hence, the independence for India. He nailed the British mischief by pointing out to the British Prime Minister that the Indian delegates were not the "elected" representatives of the Indian people, and that the colonial government was their cushioning factor. He ventured ahead to directly tell the Chairman that the communal problem must not be allowed to block the progress of the constitution making and that the constitution must be hammered out at the Conference. Failing to fulfil this function, he wanted that the Minorities sub-committee be adjourned sine die.[56]

But Muslim delegates chose to differ from Gandhi, so did Ambedkar. They were joined by Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians who did not endorse Gandhi's suggestion either. The Sikhs too wanted negotiations to remain open. They wanted committee work to go on and decide how the claims of the minorities were to be adjusted – "We cannot get away from this." While members were debating the issue, the Chairman, Ramsay MacDonald, was harping on the favourite theme which had been reiterated in the British official circles time and again that communal problem was a problem of fact not enforced or enforceable by the government. In the same vein, Ramsay MacDonald supported the dissenters believing that Gandhi had met his rebuff at the hands of the Minorities.[57] But was not this the colonial government

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 528-29.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 529.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 530.
[50] Nanda, *Road to Pakistan*, pp. 154-55.
[51] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (*BAWS*), (edited by Vasant Moon), Vol. 9, Bombay, The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991, p. 57.
[52] Biswas, 'Gandhi's Approach to Caste and Untouchability', p. 85.
[53] *Indian Round Table Conference (Second Session)*, p. 544.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 531.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 534.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 530.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 536.

had planned all along? The colonial strategy was obvious, to have Gandhi attend the Conference and then neutralise him and his efforts to carry on the Civil Disobedience Movement – aimed at wrecking the Indian National Movement from within. At the RTC, Gandhi was pitted against "leaders of distinction," fellow Indians, whom the colonial authorities had handpicked and upon whose support the government was relying to retard the constitutional progress of India.[58]

The British remained determined to make the RTC a success. The Chairman hinted at the minority members to come to common agreement among themselves and even suggested to have such agreement circulated. The Chairman then stated, "[we] will find it absolutely impossible to lay down or draft this constitution," as if justifying Gandhi's apprehensions. Ramsay MacDonald went ahead, egging on the delegates, "we have felt very keenly that the agreement be flowed from your own hearts and the result of your own agreements."[59] From this emerged the idea of an agreement entitled, "Claims of Minority Communities," more popularly known as The Minorities Pact, signed jointly by the representatives of the Muslims, Indian Christians, Anglo Indians, Domiciled Europeans and the Depressed Classes; signatories being Aga Khan, Henry Gidney, Pannir Selvam, Hubert Carr and Ambedkar.[60] They submitted the document personally to Ramsay MacDonald the night before the final meeting of the Minorities sub-committee was to commence. Gandhi was not part either of its framing or of the deputation. Quite obviously, he had been bypassed.

Next day in the meeting, the Chairman asked Aga Khan to present the document before the Minorities sub-committee. The document was about special representation, political weightage based on population and safeguards in favour of signatories. Its clause 9 was crucial, it stated that "all communities shall have representation in all legislatures through separate electorates", extending these to twenty years for the Depressed Classes.[61] Appended to the document were special claims of the signing minorities. The Minorities Pact covered approximately 46% of India's population, and the Chairman hoped that this would put the things in order. Accordingly, he announced the Pact an official document, and wanted the sub-committee to agree to it and do away with the communal obstacle.[62] But non-signatories, delegate after delegate, strongly disapproved the secrecy attached to the Pact and saw it as an attempt to fragment India into religious communities with the prospect of most disastrous results.[63] The Sikhs called it a camouflage, "an alliance to share booty taken from other people."[64] B. S. Moonje, Ujjal Singh, Chimanlal Setalvad, Raja Narendra Nath, N. M. Joshi, and Sarojini Naidoo were in no mood to acquiesce. Ambedkar, one of the signatories, however, spoke very little in the final meeting.

Gandhi sat through the proceedings very patiently, allowing other delegates to express themselves but when he spoke, he nailed down the colonial scheme of things with indomitable will and assertion that completely changed the course of the RTC. He took exception to The Minorities Pact but was more affected by the manner in which the British had conducted themselves in encouraging minority leaders to express their views with all the vehemence at their command. He pierced further refusing to believe that the government had brought all the delegates thousands of miles away to settle only the communal question. Continuing, he exposed that from the beginning the British had no intention towards constitution building and that it had the nefarious design to vivisect India through the grant of separate electorates. Gandhi was straightforward in pointing out that the government should have built up a respectable framework for the freedom of India so that Indian delegates could return with certain conviction. Gandhi spoke face-to-face with Ramsay MacDonald as the head of the British State.

Gandhi had a message for the signatories too. He questioned the very basis of having special cut-up groups, not convinced about the temporary expedient of the separate electorates and asked, as if in a very militant mood – "at the end of ten years we would all find ourselves hugging one another and throwing ourselves into one another's laps."[65] Then, Gandhi expressed his regards for Ambedkar, and painfully admitted that he had laboured under bitter experiences, which was a shame of Hinduism. Gandhi stated "I would rather that Hinduism died than Untouchability lived." Gandhi attempted to explain that separate electorates mean that the bar-sinister against 'Untouchables' would continue for ever. Will 'Untouchables' remain 'Untouchables' in perpetuity? He posited the question, exposing a

[58] Ravinder Kumar, 'Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Poona pact, 1932', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, Issue 1-2, 1985, p. 93.
[59] *Indian Round Table Conference (Second Session)*, p. 536.
[60] *Ibid.*, Appendix III, pp. 550-555.
[61] *Ibid.*, Appendix III, p. 551.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 544.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 539.
[64] *Ibid.*, p. 538.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 543.

naked truth about the British design based on separate electorates: two divisions would be set forth in the villages of India – "I would resist it with my life." He then directed his full attention to the British Prime Minister and said piercingly – "those who speak for the [separate] political rights of the Untouchables don't know their India."[66] Evidently, the freedom was not to grow out of The Minorities Pact, its signing was the very negation of the Indian National Movement. Gandhi announced that INC was out of the Round Table Conference and this included Gandhi too.

Gandhi's speech completely changed the tenor of the Minorities sub-committee. No other member spoke after him in the final meeting, except for the Chairman who tried to disperse what he called "misgivings."[67] He tried to assuage Gandhi that the British government would not allow community differences from carrying out its pledge to produce a constitution for the future of India. But he was emphatic that the work done in the sub-committee was not to be wasted – "do not make any mistake about that" the chairman informed the delegates.[68] He then adjourned the Minorities sub-committee sine die but appended The Minorities Pact document to his second session RTC report.

When the third session of the RTC was held, it met with a foregone conclusion and proved abortive without Gandhi and the INC as its part. This RTC was of no consequence so far as India was concerned. But what proved more crucial was the British taking recourse to undiluted communalism by making The Minorities Pact the basis to announce the Communal Award in August 1932, granting separate electorates to minority communities, including the Depressed Classes. The same year however, the Poona Pact was signed in September 1932, scuttling colonial efforts to envelope Depressed Classes under the separate electorates.

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[66] *Ibid.*, p. 544.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 255.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 545.