PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND THE COMMUNAL PROBLEM

BY S. VENKATA DESIKACHAR, M.A.

(Department of History)

Indian Opinion on Proportional Representation

There is a considerable body of opinion in favour of Proportional Representation by the method of Single Transferable Vote as eminently suited to India. The All-Parties Conference Committee (1928), for instance, observed, "we feel strongly attracted to this method and are of opinion that it offers the only rational and just way of meeting the fears and claims of various communities. There is a place in it for every minority and an automatic adjustment takes place of rival interests. We have no doubt that Proportional Representation will in future be the solution of our problem".¹

The differences that have arisen are mainly with regard to the difficulties in the way of introducing the system under the present circumstances. The Indian Statutory Commission observed that it could not be worked successfully in the present state of education and experience of the Indian electors. Further, they thought that with its introduction, the constituencies, already huge and unwieldy, would become much worse.² On the other hand, the majority of the members of the All-Parties Conference Committee, 1928, noted that in spite of mass illiteracy, the system of Proportional Representation had been worked successfully in Malta. The device of the three boxes of the same colour for each candidate with different symbols painted on each box to indicate the first, second and third choice would, they thought, enable the illiterate electors to record their votes without experiencing any difficulty.³

Controversy has centred round the mechanical and administrative difficulties in the way of introducing the system of Proportional Representation. It is generally assumed that if we can discover some means of overcoming the administrative difficulties the system offers a satisfactory solution of the main problems that confront us to-day. The assumption is quite unfounded.

¹ The All-Parties Conference Committee Report, 1928, p. 36.
³ The All-Parties Conference Committee Report, 1928, pp. 36-37.
In the following pages, it is attempted to show that the system does not in any way help us to resolve the communal tangle.

*Indian Minorities Too Small and Diffused to be Benefited by Proportional Representation*

The advocates of Proportional Representation believe that the system enables minority communities to return their own representatives in sufficient numbers, and thus make the abolition of the system of communal electorates and reserved seats possible. But, unfortunately, the Indian minorities (including Hindus and Muslims in Provinces where they are in a minority) are too small and diffused. Without the support of the voters of other communities, they cannot return a sufficient number of their community men to the Legislatures.

Since the importance of this factor is not sufficiently realised, it is necessary to examine in detail how far the system of Proportional Representation can safeguard minority interests, and how far it can form a satisfactory substitute for the present system of separate electorates. Under a system of Proportional Representation, in a five member constituency—the standard generally adopted—, the candidates would have to poll at least 16.6 per cent. of the votes cast. This is generally termed the quota. Communities whose population strength is less than the quota percentage, *i.e.*, 16.6 per cent., cannot be sure of being able to return one of their own men without the support of the voters of other communities. Do the various communities that vote in separate constituencies to-day possess this minimum population strength?

1. *Europeans and Anglo-Indians*—Europeans and Anglo-Indians are a microscopic minority and their interests cannot be adequately protected by means of Proportional Representation.

2. *Indian Christians* are more than 16.6 per cent. of the population in some of the taluks of the Tinnavelly District in the Madras Presidency and in certain parts of Lushai Hills District in Assam. But, in other parts of India they are far below the quota percentage.

3. *Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Minorities*—In the following provinces, Hindu and Muslim minorities are largely diffused, and in most of the districts their population strength is less than the quota percentage.
### Proportional Representation and the Communal Problem

(1931 Census)\(^4\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>The number of districts in which the community is</th>
<th>Less than 16%</th>
<th>More than 16%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madras...</td>
<td>Muslim minority</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay...</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U. P.</td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. P.</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The N.W.F. Province</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While in the province as a whole, the Hindus form a minority in Bengal and the Punjab, and the Muslims in Assam, they are in a majority in many districts of the province. This enables them to return their own community men in sufficient numbers even under the system of single member constituencies.\(^5\)

The Sikhs in the Punjab and the Hindus in Sind are the only communities whose interests might be adequately safeguarded by the introduction of Proportional Representation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
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<th>More than 16%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sind</td>
<td>Hindu minority</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>Sikh minority</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\) For the purpose of this analysis the district is not too large a unit, except in the case of Bihar. For instance, in the case of the Legislative Assemblies of the United Provinces and Bombay, the average number of members per district is 4.7 and 8.3 respectively.

\(^5\) I am aware that this is a controversial issue and that my view needs substantiation. But a lengthy discussion of this view has been avoided as out of place here.
(4) Scheduled Castes—Certain castes, principally the Scheduled Castes, are more than 16·6 per cent. of the population in many of the provinces. Under the system of Proportional Representation, they will be in a position to elect their own men in sufficient numbers.

*Proportional Representation does not Guarantee Weightage or Representation in Proportion to Population*

Under the present circumstances, no system which does not guarantee representation at least in proportion to population can be considered to be acceptable to minority communities. Under the system of Proportional Representation, the minority communities can be sure of returning their community men only in constituencies where they are above the quota percentage; their electoral chances would be limited to the extent they are diffused. Therefore, weightage or even representation in proportion to population cannot be secured to minorities by means of Proportional Representation. It may be suggested that we can get over the difficulty by reserving seats to minorities. But, if we have to reserve seats to secure their adequate representation, where then is the need for Proportional Representation, unless we can justify its introduction on grounds other than the need for safeguarding minority interests?

*Non-Proportional Voting Preferable to Proportional Representation for Fighting Communalism*

Since, under the system of Proportional Representation, the members of a minority community can join hands and return their own men, even if it be against the organised opposition of the majority community, it is quite possible for communal parties to operate successfully; the system does not hinder the growth of communal parties. Joint electorates with non-proportional voting makes communal politics difficult: the candidates are made more directly dependent on the voters of all communities, and it would not pay them to adopt a communal platform. To check the growth of communalism, joint electorates with non-proportional voting are, therefore, preferable to the system of Proportional Representation.

One other point of relatively minor importance might be noted here. Although separate electorates are inimical to happy communal relations in public life, they minimise friction at election times; for the communities vote in separate constituencies and the competing candidates belong to the same

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6 Seats may be reserved to safeguard minority interests. That does not vitiate the observations made here.
community. Under joint electorates with non-proportional voting the competing candidates would belong to different communities. At first sight, it might appear that the electoral fight would give rise to great communal tension. But, under the system, there is not only association, but also inter-dependence between the communities. Normally, no community can think of carrying the day in spite of the opposition of other communities. The competing candidates cannot afford to alienate the sympathies of any considerable body of voters by adopting a wholly communal platform. Inter-communal co-operation is, therefore, essential; and friction at election times is greatly minimised. Under the system of Proportional Representation too, the communities are no doubt brought into closer contact. But, each community would desire to organise on communal lines, particularly when the political bond is weak. The rivalry of the communal groups to elect their own representatives would naturally lead to great communal tension. The danger would be particularly great in provinces like Bengal and the Punjab where there is more than one strong community, and the fight for power is keen.

\[7\] In the past, friction at election times has been due to sub-communal rather than to inter-communal differences. Shia-Sunni conflicts have often led to petitions for setting aside elections on the ground that undue influence was used. *Election Cases*, p. 445. Hammond: *India and Burma*, 1920-35. Growth of sub-communal feeling in Madras: *The Indian Delimitation Committee*, Vol. III, p. 5.