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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Insidious Return of Separate Electorates

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The Insidious Return of Separate Electorates

The Hindu 11 May 2026 **GS2**

TH The Hindu

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"When does community representation become identity segregation -- and where do we draw the line in a constitutional democracy?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu warns that identity-based electoral arrangements – once decisively rejected by the Constituent Assembly – are quietly creeping back into India’s political design through community-coded constituencies, religious vote-bank engineering, and reservation demands that mimic the logic of separate electorates. The piece argues that any drift towards a fragmented electorate strikes at the basic structure of equal citizenship.

THE GHOST OF 1932

The Communal Award of August 1932, announced by British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, granted separate electorates to Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and the Depressed Classes. For Mahatma Gandhi, extending this to Dalits was a civilisational rupture – it would, he warned, freeze caste segregation into the very machinery of the State. His fast unto death produced the Poona Pact of September 1932, replacing separate electorates for Dalits with reserved seats within a joint electorate.

That distinction – reserved seats inside one common electorate versus separate electorates outside it – is the constitutional fault line India must guard.

WHY THE CONSTITUTION SAID NO

When the Constituent Assembly debated minority safeguards between 1947 and 1949, members such as Sardar Patel, B.R. Ambedkar and K.M. Munshi converged on a single conclusion: separate electorates had partitioned the country and would, if retained, partition the polity. The Advisory Committee on Minorities, chaired by Patel,

dismantled separate electorates in May 1949. Reservation in legislatures was retained only for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and even that within a joint electorate – voters of every community choosing the reserved-seat candidate together.

The principle was clear:

- **One citizen, one vote, one electorate.**
- Group identity may justify representation; it cannot justify segregation.
- The vote is an instrument of integration, not enumeration.

THE NEW FORMS OF AN OLD IDEA

The editorial flags four contemporary patterns that mimic separate-electorate logic without using the name:

- ❶ **Religiously coded constituency engineering** – candidate selection driven entirely by the demographic arithmetic of a single community.
- ❷ **Ticket distribution by sub-caste shares** rather than by programmatic platforms.
- ❸ **Demands for community-exclusive reservations** in local bodies that go beyond the SC/ST/OBC framework.
- ❹ **Communal mobilisation through digital echo chambers** that turn voters into demographic blocs rather than citizens.

Each, in isolation, may seem a pragmatic concession to plural society. Cumulatively, they recreate the 1932 architecture in twenty-first century language.

BASIC STRUCTURE AND EQUAL CITIZENSHIP

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that secularism, equality and democracy form part of the basic structure – in *Kesavananda Bharati* (1973), *S.R. Bommai* (1994) and *I.R. Coelho* (2007). Any electoral design that effectively confines a citizen's political choice to candidates of their own community fails the equality test under Article 14, the non-discrimination test under Articles 15 and 16, and the secularism test that runs through the Preamble.

Reservation of seats is constitutional precisely because every voter – regardless of caste, faith or language – participates in electing the reserved-seat representative. Take that joint participation away, and reservation becomes segregation.

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Key arguments:

- Separate electorates were rejected by the Constituent Assembly as incompatible with national unity and equal citizenship.
- Reserved seats within a joint electorate (SC/ST) are constitutionally distinct from separate electorates.
- Modern identity-coded constituency engineering risks recreating the 1932 design without statutory cover.
- Equality (Article 14), non-discrimination (Articles 15-16) and secularism form part of the basic structure.

Counterarguments:

- Proportional or community-sensitive representation can deepen inclusion in deeply plural societies.
- Descriptive representation – legislators from the represented group – improves substantive outcomes for marginalised communities.

Keywords: Communal Award 1932, Poona Pact, joint electorate, reserved seats, Article 325, basic structure, Constituent Assembly Advisory Committee on Minorities, descriptive representation.

The Hindu's argument is not against minority representation – it is against the architecture that converts representation into segregation. The Indian electorate must remain a single, undivided community of citizens. The moment a vote becomes a census entry, the Republic begins to forget what 1949 decided.

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