

# Merit of Reservations

*Upper caste youth are not willing to tolerate the sharing of government educational facilities with youth coming from historically oppressed communities. But reservations and nation building are not antagonistic. The democratic and rational path charted by Ambedkar should be allowed to run its course; otherwise, an anarchist trend is bound to set in among the SC/ST/OBCs. Let the upper castes decide which course is better for the progressive transformation of this nation.*

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Ever since Arjun Singh, the union minister for human resource development, announced in the first week of April that the government is likely to provide 27 per cent reservation to other backward classes (OBCs) in admissions to the central educational institutions, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and medical colleges, the national media started instigating anti-reservation agitations. Upper caste intellectuals who believe in the theory of merit began lambasting Arjun Singh and the reservation policy itself. Upper caste medical students began an agitation against reservation. Why is upper caste youth not willing to tolerate the sharing of government educational facilities with youth coming from historically oppressed communities? They view the proposed reservation as an instrument to limit the share of the future generations of their families and castes. The same upper caste youth have never agitated against private medical, engineering and management colleges selling seats to the rich for money. An anti-caste policy like reservation is being projected as an anti-national policy.

The OBC youth who are going to get the reserved seats belong to this nation as much as these upper caste youth. They will not be worse in terms of merit than those who buy their seats. The question is not whether they become socially useful doctors, engineers, managers and so on, but which family and caste benefits. The agitating upper caste students and the mainstream media backing them are not interested in better healthcare services. At no point of time the students of these institutions have agitated about the lack of healthcare facilities for the masses in rural and urban India. They are not concerned about the nation or the quality of education.

All they seem to be bothered about are the opportunities of their own families and castes. In this article we examine the issue of reservation in the context of the nation.

## Backdrop

In 1990 the V P Singh government reformulated the ideological discourse on reservations by granting 27 per cent reservation to OBCs in the central services. The notion of social justice became integral to the system, repositioning of the relations between various castes. In a society hierarchically divided along caste lines—castes are “enclosed classes”—the principle of reservation was aimed at engendering organic intellectuals who engage with the state and civil society with altogether different assumptions. The principle of reservation as ideologically constructed by B R Ambedkar and Periyar Ramasamy during the nationalist period was meant to create an educated intellectual group that emerges out of the historically oppressed castes. Right from the times of the Kautilyan state and Manu’s legal code, brahminism had denied the oppressed castes access to education and employment. Hence the process of engendering organic intellectuals from the ranks of the oppressed castes had to be gone through; it was the Mandal agenda that provided the impetus.

Since then civil society has been shaken up. There has been a clear polarisation of society along caste lines, with a “war of position”. Each political party and institution is divided along caste lines. Caste has become an ideological anchor around which the discourse began to be conducted. Given that, among other things, caste culture nurtures the mental faculties of individuals, each person has to search for a secular self or an egalitarian self. Ideologically, reservation policy was/is aimed at the expansion of democratic spaces. Pre-Mandal,

Indian democracy was essentially an upper caste democracy. Though the SC/STs were given reservation in the electoral, educational and employment spheres, they were relegated to the margins. SC/ST reservation was seen as a mechanism to overcome untouchability and tribalism. It did not address the caste system and it was not linked to the modern notion of social justice. The brahminical intellectuals did not come to terms with the discourse of social justice because this posed a real danger of displacing them in many realms of knowledge and institutional authority. They began to attack the notion of social justice as a retrograde and “casteist” step. Anything that displaces the brahminical elements from their positions of power and privilege gets characterised as retrograde.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) worked out its Kamandal agenda to nullify the Mandal agenda. The Congress under the leadership of P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh brought privatisation on the agenda to minimise the effect of reservations in the state sector. The BJP demolished the Babri masjid and organised communal riots to galvanise the OBCs by pitting them against Muslims. They sought to project “casteist” Hinduism as homogeneous and wanted to stop the OBCs from getting Mandalised and organised into an independent political force. Quite interestingly the brahmins and banias in all parties oppose reservations, while the kshatriyas, who have a small space in the Indian power structure, have taken the initiative in setting the reservation agenda. V P Singh then, and Arjun Singh now have taken that initiative. The brahminical media has been projecting them as villains. Let us not forget the fact that Gautham Buddha was also condemned in the same manner by his brahminical contemporaries.

## Can They Stop It?

Neither Kamandal forces nor the anti-reservationist mindset of the upper castes could stop the process of Mandalisation of the state and civil society. The principle of social justice of an Indian variety, different from what was postulated by John Rawls, came into operation. The response of the upper castes to that was more privatisation. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government deployed a rabid anti-reservationist, Arun Shourie, as minister of disinvestment. This necessitated a more sustained demand for reservation in the private sector. Since Hindu nationalists

were selling Indian companies to foreigners, the dalit-bahujans had to ask caste-based reservations in the multinational companies setting up facilities in India. The UN Durban conference of 2001 and the US house of representatives committee hearing of 2005 were used for that purpose. Thus, the issue of caste and untouchability also got globalised.

In the backdrop of the discourse on Mandal, the issue of 33 per cent reservations for women in Parliament and the state assemblies came up. Quite interestingly there was no opposition to women's reservation from the upper caste intelligentsia and the media on the ground of merit. It was the OBC leadership that demanded women's reservations based on the principle of female social justice called "reservation within reservation". The hypocrisy of the upper caste intelligentsia and media was quite clear when they remained totally supportive of women's reservation but not of SC/ST/OBC reservations.

### Myth of Merit

The debate on OBC reservations now certainly gets crowded with the demand for reservations in the private sector. The cobwebs surrounding reservations in the private sector will, to some extent, get cleared with the implementation of OBC reservations in all the central educational institutions. If the present ideology of merit in IIT, IIM and medical education is nailed, the private sector will have to fall in line. The notion of merit must be reset in relation to the levels of living of the masses and improved productivity in both the agrarian and industrial sectors. Development of innovative technologies and evolution of non-discriminatory management systems in all spheres of life do not depend on marks-centred merit. They depend on social connectivity, socially relevant knowledge and good institutional training. The SC/ST/OBC youth are better suited for that kind of a transformational role.

The brahminical theory of merit is like the Adi Shankara's theory of 'maya'. It is dissociated from improvements in the living conditions of the people. It is generated in the dual policy – English and regional language – of education and in costly coaching centres. It is not the kind of merit reflected in the generation and dissemination of innovative knowledge and improvements in productivity. It is merit based upon imported textbooks and mugged up reproduction. In this method of

recitation and reproduction, as a Hindu priest does from the Vedas in a temple or on a ritual occasion, a regenerative nation is not going to be constructed.

The upper caste theoreticians of merit are again saying that "merit is once again at peril in higher educational institutions" as it was with jobs in 1990. At that time they said that if the reservation snake creeps into R&D organisations and into the military apparatus, the nation would be in danger. If the present attack of the upper castes continues, the lower caste youth will have to look for model of struggle akin to that of the Maoist movement in Nepal. Since the Nepali caste system did not allow social mobility, the lower castes had to resort to violent struggles as an alternative. In India, the system of reservations provides a mechanism of peaceful transformation of the caste-centred system and a redefinition of merit.

After the reservations for OBCs in jobs began to be implemented, not a single upper caste intellectual has been able to establish that those OBC candidates who entered through the reservation route undermined those institutions in terms of merit. They have also not been able to prove that the institutions headed by the upper castes had produced high quality

output. On the other hand the reservationists have been arguing that with upper caste intellectuals heading all the major national institutions over the years and endowed with brahminical merit, these institutions have not been able to deliver with respect to the goals set, whether that of enhanced productivity or distributive justice. Brahminical merit led the nation to foreign debt peonage and dependence. In China the former working class youth (akin to our lower castes) occupied all the key positions after the revolution and successfully developed science and technology through self-reliance. Where does Indian upper caste merit stand in comparison with that of the merit of the socially mobile working class of China?

### Diabolic Education Policy

After independence the brahminical centre declared Hindi as official national language, but ran all its central institutions in English. For deceptive ideological reasons English is also being projected as a colonial language. The children of the SC/ST/OBCs, who (with a great difficulty) study in government schools, are forced to remain away from the English language. English has become the national language

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of the upper castes. For the productive mass that lives in the villages, English education is projected negatively. Ambedkar nailed this thinking by writing extensively in English. But subsequently the leaders who emerged from the dalit-bahujan castes did not realise the importance of the English language in challenging upper caste hegemony. English is the medium of instruction in private and selective central schools, but the OBC/SC/STs are excluded for, by and large, they cannot afford that education. Thus, English plus money (that provides coaching at every stage of the child's life) confers merit and the productive mass is excluded. The dalit-bahujan and tribal mass have been relegated to the margins. As a result for a long time no middle class has emerged from among the dalit-bahujan castes, as they were carrying the historical burden of illiteracy of centuries.

They are confined to "compartmentalised" artisan professions, with some traditional skills, but even now, they are not being allowed to develop modern skills, nor are they being allowed to acquire modern knowledge and English education. The system must let every child learn three subjects in English and three subjects in regional languages across the country, with a uniformly structured syllabus, from class one. If such a school system is put in place, and if all the tutorial institutions are banned, over a period of 25 years from now reservation can be done away with. Reservation, till then, remains the main avenue to social mobility and access to modern education for the OBC/SC/STs, which are preconditions for the modernisation of India.

### **Merit in IITs and IIMs?**

The rural SC/ST/OBC student community is in close interaction with nature. They are not too deficient in mathematics. A number of such students who got the opportunity to educate themselves in reasonably good institutions have proved their merit beyond any doubt. The so-called premier institutions, the IITs, IIMs and medical schools whose students are agitating against reservation, have so far not worked to improve technology in rural India, or management in rural areas, or the public healthcare system. Most of the graduates of the IITs and IIMs join US or western European multinational companies and/or migrate to western Europe or the US. So far not many who have been trained

in these institutions have worked for the improvement of the nation's technological and management structures.

If the OBCs with less marks at the entry level are allowed to share the seats in these institutions, that in itself is not going to make a substantial difference in terms of creativity and productivity of these institutions. Given the creative interaction of the boys and girls coming from lower castes with nature and the means of production, having entered into such institutions, they might show exceptional talent in discovering new ways of doing things that could enhance the knowledge base of the country. The educational institutions of India must provide a wide interactive base for people who have rich experience of involvement in multiple productive activities since their childhood. Most of the first-generation educated dalit-bahujan youth have that kind of childhood experience. These minds need to be exposed to systematic thinking and analysis. Modern institutional education provides that kind of scope, but in the name of merit many creative minds were not allowed to enter these institutions for several decades. The reservation system opens up that kind of opportunity for some creative minds among dalit-bahujan youth who were deprived of such opportunity for centuries. In fact the nation would stand to gain a lot from their entry into these institutions.

Further, when reservations coming into force in all the central educational institutions they will get democratised and more creative interactions among youth from diverse backgrounds would take place. Reservations are a democratic means to avoid social unrest based on caste discrimination. If the people sitting in the central educational institutions and the private companies keep on harping on the merit of marks but not of opportunities to all, the anger of dalit-bahujan castes is bound to increase. That in itself is likely to lead to civil strife as it happened in Paris last year.

### **Reservations and Development**

Reservations and nation-building are not antagonistic. The south Indian experience has proved that. Reservations in south India have been more deeply entrenched. The difference between the northern and southern Indian states is quite stark in terms of the participatory levels of the lower castes in institutions and markets. Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad could

become the more modern centres because of better participation of the OBC/SC/STs in all kinds of markets. Delhi and Kolkata, which remain predominantly brahminical cities, are backward because OBC/SC/ST participation in the higher-level structures of those cities is minimal.

Unless the productive castes come to terms with modernity they cannot unleash their productive energy. The nation becomes more knowledge-oriented only when shining examples emerge in the villages and shake up the village level caste communities, which have enormous common sense and logical thinking but no exposure to institutional education. The higher dropout rates at the IIT and IIM kind of institutions are not because the SC/ST/OBCs cannot perform in their respective subjects, but due to the brahminical cultural environment that these institutions had inculcated. The Indian institutional-cultural environment is worse than the white cultural environment in America or South Africa. In this discriminatory cultural environment the innovative cutting edge of the dalit-bahujan youth gets lost and they slip into a withdrawal syndrome. If a biased and prejudiced professor humiliates an SC/ST/OBC student, the student keeps blaming her/his own birth into a particular caste but not her/his inability to hard work. In fact, such humiliation kills her/his motivation to hard work. And, at the societal level, the culture of caste humiliation has destroyed the creative energies of the nation.

If the IITs and IIMs want to produce innovative talent, they must come to terms with reservation. The national identity of these institutions should not be based on what kind of jobs their graduates get in the US or western Europe. It should be based on the innovative technologies and transformational management systems they develop. Reservation does not reduce the scope of national innovativeness. The merit of a scientific or technological community does not lie in mere adoption of the developments in science and technology invented/innovated by others but in indigenous inventions/innovations that are then adopted elsewhere in the world. If the democratic and rational course evolved by Ambedkar is not allowed to achieve that goal, an anarchist trend is bound to set in among the SC/ST/OBCs. Let the upper castes decide which course is better for the progressive transformation of this nation. **[EW]**

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