Agitations for Reservations and the Way Out

Reservations in India has grappled with the question of whether “caste” or “class” should be made the basis of giving reservation to a section of the population. While a lot many were the proponents of using only economic backwardness as a criterion for reservation, many others held the view that social backwardness also needs be included in it.

In the landmark **Indra Sawhney case**, the Supreme Court held that “social backwardness” is a measure of marginalization of a community and a purely economic criterion would allow the higher-ups in the hierarchy of social status to monopolise state power, which will nullify the purpose of reservation.

The agitations against caste-based reservations picked up its peak when the reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) was introduced by Mandal Commission in 1989. Over time, the anti-reservation agitations have taken the form of violent groups demanding reservations for themselves.

Image: Maratha Reservation stir in Maharashtra (Source: DNAIndia)

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In recent times, a multitude of communities, consisting of both dominant and cornered groups, have launched agitations in various parts of the countries demanding reservations. This includes Patidars in Gujarat, Gujjars in Rajasthan, Jats in Haryana, Tea Tribes in Assam and the most recent - Marathas in

Maharashtra. Their agitations can be described in a number of factors which include farming crisis and rising unemployment among others.

Crisis in Agriculture

The occupation of farming has become an unviable one due to low prices, underdeveloped irrigation system, decrease in landholding size and lack of government support and it has rendered the powerful farming community to a state of debt and depression.

Having prospered after the green revolution, these castes are now facing agrarian distress and deep stagnation in the rural economy. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS 59th round), the average land holding in India came down from 2.63 acres in 1960-61 to 1.06 acres in 2003-4, or down by about 60% in four decades.

Unemployment

As farming became less and less profitable, rural youth migrated to cities in search of jobs. The avenues for government jobs were scarce and private jobs paid very low wages. This was one of the reasons the Patidars in Gujarat demanded an end to private educational institutions that charged high prices from students but could not give them jobs due to the lack of quality in the education so received.

The lack of jobs is one of the major reasons for the unreserved communities blaming the reserved ones for taking up their jobs. The uneven economic development and unequal distribution of its fruits have led a section to believe that reservation is the reason for their miseries.

Corporate-driven Economic Model Leading to an Increased Rift Between Rich and Poor

Following the boom of private industries, farmers sold their lands at high prices. However, soon they realized that they were not gaining much from these industries. With time, the money earned from selling land was exhausted and they were left with nothing but despair. Some of them invested in MSMEs but even these met with failure, given the lack of skills and expertise, red-tapism and lack of support from the government.

Resentment Towards OBCs

While the dominant castes see their power declining, their resentment towards the OBCs and especially the creamy layer, grew by leaps and bounds.

Grievances over reservations existed before Mandal but it did not lead to serious conflicts or turmoil. Numerous surveys and official statistics pointed out the fact that the reservation of OBCs has empowered the poor. Nevertheless, it led to a new breed of identity politics and a spate of violence and unrest that keeps recurring at an alarming frequency.

Political Interests

Many of the agitations are a byproduct of mobilization of populations by a few in order to gain political advantage. Though it is righteous to demand proportional representation in a democracy, these agitations seldom achieve the purported goals. Most of the participants indulge in arson and violent acts and serve as pawns for the political agents.

The Way Ahead

We need to view reservations with a more critical and neutral lens, where though it has helped many sections, it is a limited concession which does not tackle the root of the problem necessary for the social and economic emancipation of the marginalized. The SC/ST communities still lag far behind other communities in terms of education, employment or social status. Thus, it is important that the problem is addressed in a more holistic manner.

First, most of the agitations come from the peasant class. Therefore, agrarian reforms need immediate attention so that the agitated rural poor can be pacified.

Second, if social justice is the cornerstone of the reservation policy, India is at a juncture where social justice can only be ensured by creating jobs on a large scale and not by further extending reservations along caste lines.

Third, reservations in India essentially refers to the inclusion of subordinated and marginalised groups. We need to rethink that poverty as a new face of subordination and therefore economically backward classes need to be included just the same.

Fourth, many castes that form the creamy layer of OBC have been questioned on the basis of their comparatively better social status. Thus, further filtering of the reserved category will enable the benefits of reservations to reach only the most deserving ones.

Fifth, it is important to condemn and oppose the manoeuvrings of greedy political leaders who seek to make reservation a device for consolidating their influence and thereby fan caste divisions and divide the people. This is a cynical manipulation of the aspirations of the most oppressed sections of the downtrodden castes.

Last but not the least, the government and the people need to work together for the upliftment of the depressed classes. If increased reservations in educational institutions are present, it must go hand in hand with compensatory increases in seats in higher education for the unreserved, so that no deserving candidate is deprived of his higher education.

The pace at which these agitations are gaining momentum serves as a warning for all of us. Not only it undermines social harmony and peace, it also threatens our democracy by instilling in us the attributes of a mobocracy.

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