

Caste in Indian Politics

One of the significant issues in Indian politics is certainly caste that, besides being a social marker, also provides a readymade form of organization which is critical for political mobilization in electoral politics. Caste is, as Nicholas B. Dirks informs, in fact not some unchanged survival of ancient India, not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, not a basic expression of Indian tradition. It is, he further adds, a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically the product of a historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. Colonialism was, for instance, instrumental in politicizing caste for its own divide and rule strategy that was articulated through a well-calculated reservation scheme. The nationalists insistence on caste-based reservation had given the legitimacy which the colonial state needed to justify the scheme as beneficial to the peripheral majority who remained marginalized in the Hindu social hierarchy due to their birth in so-called lower castes. In post-colonial India, caste continues to remain significant though the members of the Constituent Assembly firmly believed that with democracy and modernization, it would lose its importance. Far from losing importance, caste however continues to exert determining influence in Indian society. Not only is the caste most conspicuous marker of social privilege in India, political parties in modern India prefer to consolidate their support by aligning with one caste group or another. Caste has therefore become a significant criterion of electoral politics in contemporary India.

The rise of the backward castes- those groups intermediate between the Scheduled Castes at the bottom and the Brahmins and Rajputs at the top- has radically altered India's political texture in recent times. In legal terms, these groups are known as Other Backward Castes or Classes (OBCs) to distinguish them from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It was these OBCs who formed the social basis and provided the leadership of those parties which pushed the Congress party out of power in 1967 in a large number of Indian states. In the 1977 national election, these OBCs were critical in sustaining the opposition to the Congress party. In fact, the coalition survived so long as the OBC-led Lok Dal and Socialist Party held the balance among the disparate conglomeration of parties, known as the Janata party.

The OBCs became a formidable group because of economic power which they got through land reforms and the Green revolution; given their numerical strength, they also gained political power. What they lacked was administrative power. Hence the Janata government appointed the Mandal Commission in 1978 which identified caste as the main denominator of

backwardness. On the basis of state surveys, the Commission recognized that there were 3,743 specific castes which still remained backward. Though they constituted more than half of India's population, these castes were poorly represented in the administration, especially at the higher levels. Hence, to redress this imbalance, the Commission recommended that 27 per cent of the Central Government jobs be reserved for these castes.

In what is euphorically described as 'deepening of democracy', the Mandal recommendations remained the most critical input in grasping Indian politics in recent years. Recommending "quota" for the OBCs, the report is broadly a scheme for "affirmative action" for socially underprivileged sections of society. By deciding to implement the Mandal Commission Report, submitted to the Government of India in 1980, the V.P. Singh government championed, as it were, the cause of 52 per cent of the population belonging to the OBCs. Although the recommendations were accepted by the government in 1990, attempts were made in the past to accord reservation to what was defined as the OBCs. To fulfil a constitutional obligation, as Article 340 suggests, the government of India appointed the First Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as Kaka Kalelkar Commission after its chairman, in 1953. The Commission submitted its report in 1955, listing about 32 per cent of population as backward on the basis of caste identity. The Commission also identified 2,399 castes as backward. However, Kalelkar himself rejected the report when he placed the report for presidential assent saying that it would have been preferable to determine backwardness on principles rather than caste. Although the reservation scheme was shelved at the national level, nearly all the states constituted their Backward Commission and legalized reservation in public services and educational institutions under state control. The Second Backward Classes Commission, known as the Mandal Commission, appointed in 1978, revived interests in formulating a national policy for OBCs. The Commission suggested that OBCs forming 52 per cent of country's population required special concession to correct the social imbalance. But the Supreme Court ruled that reservations cannot exceed 50 per cent of the jobs. So the Commission reluctantly agreed to accept 27 per cent jobs for the OBCs though they constituted more than half of India's population. There was also a rider because the Commission also categorically stated that candidates belonging to OBCs recruited on the basis of merit in an open competition should not be adjusted against their reservation quota of 27 per cent. By implication what it means is the fact that if the commission's recommendations are respected, half of the posts in the public sector and universities will be filled by people who could not get in on merit, provided they belong to the right castes. As

evident, the Mandal formula rests on two premises: (a) the OBCs comprise a very large segment of India's population and (b) their representation (only 5 per cent) in the public sector is abysmally poor. Hence the recommendations ensuring 27 per cent reservations in Central jobs and education for the OBCs appear most appropriate. In contrast with the Kalelkar Commission, which took into account economic variables, among other criteria, the Mandal Commission Report changed the original philosophy of reservations by clearly identifying caste as the sole criterion for backwardness.

Whatever the advantages the Mandal formula may have, reservation for the backward castes and for the religious minorities are directed towards maintaining a balance of power in the caste-divided India's social structure. As a scheme striving to strike a balance between the privileged upper castes and the hitherto neglected OBCs, the Mandal recommendation deserves appreciation. In reality, however, the better-off sections of the OBCs would reap the benefit at the cost of the more deserving sections within these castes. To substantiate the argument, let us draw our attention to the caste dynamics in North India. Till the 1950s, domination was enjoyed in the rural areas by the AJGAR (Ahirs, Jats, Gurjars, and Rajputs) group. They gained remarkably in material terms after the Green Revolution and all of them moved well and truly into modern sector. The intermediate castes, like Kurmis, Koeris, Lodhas, and others also benefited but not uniformly, and therefore there is considerable social and economic heterogeneity in each of these castes. Hence, the Mandal definition of backwardness does not appear plausible in view of its obvious limitation of having ignored social and economic heterogeneity among OBCs. As a result, the benefits, meant for the backwards of the OBCs, are likely to be monopolized by the better-off and influential in these castes. In other words, the rhetoric of reservation is addressed to the mass of under-privileged, but their rewards are reserved for the affluent upper castes of the OBCs.

The political imperatives behind reservations are thus apparent. What prompted the ruling parties to accept the Mandal recommendations is probably a well-calculated design aiming at mobilizing the support of the OBC elite. By virtue of its unique status in the OBC society, its wealth, its relatively high educational level, and its hegemony in a majority of caste councils, the OBC upper crust is viewed as the most significant power brokers in the Hindi heartland. So, the Mandal formula, designed to ensure social justice, is virtually a scheme for creating and sustaining a secure vote bank for the V.P. Singh-led National Front government. And, since number counts in franchise today, parties irrespective of ideology strive hard to win the support of caste groups for electoral gains by promises whipping up caste sentiments. So, if

caste has acquired a new lease of life in independent India, this is almost entirely because of the increasing use made of it in politics. The decision to implement the Mandal Commission report is just another effort to effectively draw on caste sentiments for victory in elections. The Commission is thus described as a caste commission which is seen as a passport to power. Whatever the future of the reservation plan, the Mandal formula has polarized the contemporary political forces more sharply than before. So, a mere acceptance of modern secular political idioms does not ensure their sustenance in a society which draws on feudal sentiments and primordial loyalties. It is not therefore strange that elections are conducted on caste calculations, the candidates are nominated on caste ratio, and as a consequence, patronage is likely to be distributed on caste basis and public policies are also to be tilted in favour of the caste support base.

Despite sharp criticism and violent student fury directed against the Mandal Commission Report, the formula deserves serious attention as it strives to correct the injustice of centuries inflicted on the downtrodden in the name of the discriminatory varna system. Due to peculiar socio-economic transformation in India which had a long colonial past, the benefits, meant for the genuine backwards, are likely to go to the relatively better-off sections within the OBC. So, the Commission's aim of ensuring a greater equality for the OBCs as such is sure to be defeated under the present circumstances. Unless it becomes a part of a comprehensive plan for development, the Mandal formula, despite B.P. Mandal's sincerity and devotion to the OBC cause, hardly makes sense in a situation in which the reservation plan is being utilized primarily for electoral gains. Yet, none of the political parties can be critical of the reservation scheme perhaps due to adverse political consequences and also the political costs of opposing the scheme.

MANDAL II: RESERVATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Reservation in educational institutions is referred to as Mandal II. In August, 2005, the Supreme Court abolished all caste-based reservations in unaided private colleges. On 21 December 2005, the Lok Sabha passed the Ninety-third Constitutional Amendment Act, 2005 rolling back the Supreme Court judgement by introducing a new clause into Article 15 to allow for reservations for SCs and STs as well as other backward classes in private un-aided educational institutions other than minority institutions.

In 2006, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government agreed to introduce 27 per cent reservations for OBCs in Central Government-funded higher education institutions like

Indian Institute of Management, Indian Institute of Technology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences and Central Universities. In other words, the proposed design is meant to introduce 27 per cent quota to all institutions of higher learning. This blanket guarantee for reservations stands in contradiction with the 1992 Supreme Court judgement in the case of Indira Sawhney vs Union of India delivered on 16 November 1992, which upheld 27 per cent reservations subject to the exclusion of socially-advanced persons/ sections (creamy layer) from amongst the OBCs. The Court also directed the government to evolve criteria for identification of this creamy layer. In response to the Court directives, the government appointed a committee which suggested that rules of exclusion applies to children of persons holding different constitutional positions, class I officers, and defence personnel who hold the rank of colonel and above. Children of persons with annual income greater than Rs 100,000 were also to be excluded. The limit was later revised to Rs 250,000 in 2004. The recommendations were accepted and circulated among all ministries/departments of Union and state governments in September 1993, allowing reservations to come into force. In a landmark judgement in April 2008, in the case of Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs Union of India validating the Ninety-third Amendment Act, the Supreme Court endorsed the demand for reservation for the demographically preponderant OBCs in higher education institutions by excluding the creamy layer. Reiterating its views on the Indira Sawhney vs Union of India

(1992) the Court denied reservation to those who have already attained economic well-being or educational advancement as it would be unreasonable, discriminatory or arbitrary resulting in reverse discrimination. With the approval by the highest court of justice, the Ninety-third Amendment to the Constitution (2005) seems to be a culmination of a process that began with the acceptance of the Mandal recommendations by the V.P. Singh-led National Front Government in 1990 amidst serious social dislocations due largely to massive opposition by caste groups other than OBCs.

Viewed in a long-term perspective, Mandal II is a logical corollary of Mandal I. It takes forward the process of transfer of social and political power to majority communities. In the context of Mandal II, V.P. Singh thus characterized Mandal as a macro-process that has acquired its own dynamics. [Hence] no matter which party forms a government, it has to take the process further. It would not be an exaggeration if one thus argues that the centre of gravity in Indian politics is now defined by quota politics. Whatever the implications, reservation through quota translates protective discrimination into reality. In contrast with

affirmative action that is practiced in the US, it is the combination of quotas and lower eligibility criteria that defines protective discrimination in India.

THE MANDAL II ARGUMENTS

There are thus strong arguments in favour of reservation in a multicultural country like India. But difficulty arises the moment groups or communities that deserve reservation are identified on the basis of ascribed identity, namely caste. Besides the 1931 census of India, caste was never a criterion in classifying Indian population. So if caste is a defining category, the 1931 index remains critical. This is hardly persuasive because the 1931 census was guided by imperial priorities and may not have reflected India's actual demographic profile. Furthermore, since the criterion of backwardness is historically conditioned, it is doubtful whether it remains valid even in the twenty-first century.

Similarly, reservation in higher education seems to be an empty slogan in the light of the fact that seats for SCs and STs remain vacant in colleges and universities for lack of applicants. Even after more than half a century of reservation for these communities, the number of beneficiaries is abysmally low. However reservation in higher education makes no sense so long as drop-out rates in schools are alarmingly high. In order to translate the scheme into practice, what is thus required is to pursue the literacy mission seriously especially among the downtrodden by creating conditions in which benefits for going to school outweighs the forced alter-native of working in the field for mere survival. Otherwise, the benefits of reservation continue to be uneven among those who can avail them. The well-placed group of the backward section would be better off with such reservation. It would help only the creamy layer to grab the advantages. Thus the social justice agenda will always remain a distant goal.

It is difficult to suggest a convincing scheme to get out of the imbroglio relating to the reservation issue. In order to arrive at a solution one may begin by taking into account most seriously the creamy layer judgement of the Supreme Court. Unless one reviews whether it is appropriate to extend reservation to the creamy layer generations after generations. It makes no sense if the children of the IAS (Indian Administrative Services) officers, for instance, enjoy reservation simply because of their ascribed social status, even though they, despite their caste identity, are socio-economically better placed than their upper caste counterparts. This does not seem justified if the law allows the undeserving to benefit from reservation. This is to deny protection to those who deserve to be protected. So, is the cause of social

justice served well if reservation is confined to first generation learners or further? A conclusive answer to this question will probably resolve the debate. The Supreme Court of India has given a clear direction in the famous Indira Sawhney case of 1992 though India's ruling authority is restrained to implement the judicial verdict presumably because of the adverse political consequences.

Despite having stirred the sensibilities of both the socially advantaged and the disadvantaged sections of society, the Mandal initiative is a powerful input that has brought about radical changes in Indian polity and society. The grammar of entitlement has become an integral part of the language of politics in contemporary India. There can be a debate on how to execute the decision, but all political parties are unanimous in accepting the logic and reality of the Ninety-third Amendment Act (2005) confirming reservation in all institutions of higher learning. Nonetheless, the Mandal debate marks an important shift in the public justification of reservations. After Mandal, caste as a basis of collective struggle for gaining equality in positions and social status became a respectable term among the marginalized. It is now being seen as an empowering device to enhance one's meagre entitlements in society. While the first phase of reservation under the Mandal Commission represented the politics of caste assertion or the politics of identity, the second phase is one in which castes are asserting their right to power. The Mandal II is a well-argued statement demanding retooling of the normative subjectivity of formal democracy that involves critical reformations of the institutions of public and private life and requires altogether new frameworks for the accountability of the government to the people.

So, the Mandal Commission was not merely a meaningful political statement, it also redefined the nationalist goal of a more equal and just society by empowering the disadvantaged and recognizing the socially denigrated groups in addition to reduction of socio-economic disparities.