

Why has the issue of reservations provoked such bitter conflict in India?

The conflict over reservations in India is not simply a conflict about the policy itself. There are, of course, angry debates over whether such a policy should exist, what the criteria should be, and how exactly it should be implemented, but the severity of the violence is bound up with longer-term caste conflict, exacerbated by a recent rise in 'identity politics' and general social changes.

Upper caste Indians feel disadvantaged and discriminated against by the policy, outlined in the Indian constitution, of assigning places in government and higher education to those from Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This disapproval is intensified when those from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) push for reservations policies in their favour as well. This is also called for in the constitution, but in such a vague way as to allow different governments to define their constitutional responsibility in markedly different ways. At the heart of this debate is one of the unique features of Indian reservations; that, unlike in the USA with its 'affirmative action' policies, the disadvantaged far outnumber the advantaged. In the Indian case, the advantaged are seriously threatened economically and politically by such policies.

The debate has become more heated recently as upper caste Hindus have begun to gradually lose their power. It exploded onto the national scene in August 1990 when V P Singh's government announced a commitment to reserving public jobs for intermediate and backward classes, broadly in line with the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. The state as an institution has become more powerful, and combined with land reform, this has closed off many of the previous avenues by which the upper castes could dominate. The results of reservations policies are gradually coming into effect; an increase in the number of SC and ST politicians, government officials and graduates, edging the upper castes out of jobs which were previously seen as theirs almost by right. With the modernisation of the economy, university education has also become more important than ever before, and the competition has become more intense, leaving upper castes feeling that much more is now at stake. Frankel claims:

"what is at issue...is the age-old privileged position of the upper castes on all fronts: social status, economic strength, educational advantages, high-prestige occupations and political power."

The defenders of reservations claim that disadvantaged peoples deserve benefits as compensation for historical deprivation, and in order that they may compete effectively in the race for societal goods. In this view, it enables wider distribution of access to privileged positions and a greater

use of all talents, and improves social integration by increasing participation, loyalty and a sense of efficacy. Finally, the programmes are said to be self-liquidating.

Opponents of reservations argue about the bureaucracy and cost involved in administration of the system. They also complain that, rather than choosing the best candidates by academic merit, universities are forced to accept SC and ST students whose standards are lower – a reversed social elitism taking the place of academic elitism. It is unsurprising that standards among SC and ST candidates are generally lower; their access to quality secondary and even primary education is far lower than that of the upper castes, many of whom send their children to India's elite secondary schools. Only 16% of SCs live in urban areas, and only 22% are literate. These opponents argue that the policy denies meritorious individuals what they would otherwise achieve and forces them to personally pay the compensation for impersonally determined historical discrimination. Furthermore, they point out that only a privileged minority among the intended beneficiaries (those with educational and economic advantages) actually benefit, leaving the majority of SCs and STs as badly off as ever. They also argue that social integration is under threat, as an emphasis on separate treatment perpetuates distinctions, encourages dependency and breeds resentment. There is a great irony in the fact that despite its apparent commitment to abolishing caste distinctions, the central government employs caste explicitly as the main criterion for reservations. In this view, the building of an overarching, secular state has not, and cannot, cause 'primordial sentiments' to disappear. Far from being self-liquidating, the programmes are seen as persistent; SCs and STs will not easily give up their right to special treatment, and OBCs will campaign for their inclusion as well. Kothari talks of an 'entrenched vs. aspirant' model. The ascendant castes are now no longer content to simply be dependent on the entrenched castes, leading to a bilateral caste politics between these two groups. Wood claims that the widespread caste riots in Gujarat

“indicate what can happen when the disadvantaged majority becomes politically mobilised and cohesive enough to win elections and legislate for itself what it previously received as a gift but now sees as its right. The result was a head-on collision between the haves and have-nots, both of whom perceived themselves as deprived, or about to be deprived.”

Opposition tends to vary across India's states. In Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, anti-Brahmin movements have a long history, and reservations policies of a sort had existed under the British colonial government. This can be compared to Gujarat, where recent and sudden implementation of reservations policies by the Solanki government caused outrage. This suggests that such problems are not caused by the expansion of reservations *per se*, but by the suddenness of their implementation.

While upper-caste Hindus often argue for the abolition of reservations altogether, there is at least a moderate amount of consensus nationally on the need for reservations for SCs and STs. Far less consensus exists as far as OBCs are concerned; opposition is much more widespread regarding *specific aspects* (rather than the general principle) of reservation policies. Largely due to the vagueness of the Indian constitution, there is plenty of conflict over who exactly should benefit from reservations. Individual OBCs have often damaged the case for reservations generally by campaigning against policies which leave them out.

There is much conflict over policy details, not just regarding which OBCs should be included, but also over whether or not caste is a suitable criterion for reservations at all. The Janata Dal claimed that no policy except a caste-based one could quickly and effectively rectify existing imbalances in education and employment. Opponents of purely caste-based criteria (including Congress, the BJP and the CPM) suggest that class or family income would provide a more accurate means of deciding who should have places reserved. Narasimha Rao's government in 1991 argued this case, amending the solely caste-based reservation policies of V P Singh to include a 10% reservation in public jobs for the economically backward of any caste. Muslims also feel overlooked by the policy; being caste-less, yet often economically disadvantaged, they feel that it discriminates against them. Other details of the policy are often attacked. The 'carry forward' provision means that if a reserved post is not filled in a particular year, it carries over to the next year. 'Interchangeability' means that SC candidates are allowed to occupy places reserved for STs, and vice versa, if the position is not filled. These are particularly controversial because, as mentioned above, SCs and STs frequently do not fill all their reserved places in higher education. Finally, the 'roster' system is a rigid list which declares that specific positions are declared reserved, leaving many more positions unfilled.

Many of these controversies can be seen in terms of the failure of the central government to implement an acceptable all-India reservations policy for the OBCs. Such a policy would obviously be extremely difficult to draw up, given the regional variations in caste status and economic disadvantage. It may be that only an income- or class-based policy could work at an all-India level, but this might require more administrative capacity than the central government has at its disposal.

Conflict over reservations cannot, however, be seen outside the context of a general rise in 'identity politics'. This may help to explain why reservations have become such a major issue during the last two decades in particular, despite the long history of caste conflict in India. Modernisation, secularisation and the incorporation of Western values has led, as suggested by Frankel's words above, to the underprivileged castes no longer accepting oppression by upper

castes as something divinely ordained. Political 'entrepreneurs' and populists, not drawn from the upper caste, British-educated political circles of Nehru's era, but from commercial and peasant-proprietor castes, have exploited this tide of popular feeling. Partly as a consequence of the reservations policies themselves, Indians often define their political identity by caste for economic benefit. It is not simply the case that politics has become class-ridden, but that caste has become politicised. Kothari states:

"in making politics its sphere of activity, caste and kin groups...get a chance to assert their identity and to strive for positions."

There has been a competitive political mobilisation of caste at the state level in which the 'reserved list' is seen as a prize for the victorious political party, enabling it to distribute patronage to its supporters. Those lower castes previously dependent on the entrenched castes have been mobilised to increase the support bases of rival leaders. The politicisation of caste has led to outward-looking, upward-moving orientations, resulting in multiple memberships, overlapping identities and a highly secular polity. Castes take on a secular form for organisational purposes, such as 'associations' and 'federations' oriented to the securing of economic benefits, jobs or special concessions. Over time these have become strictly political groups, rather than simply caste organisations. Modern democratic politics has two conflicting aspects. Firstly, voters become aware of their role as citizens, transcending partisan concerns and giving priority to the well-being of the system as a whole. However, at the same time, it produces intense competition between groups for articulation, ascendance and control. Politics can easily *widen* the gap between the public-minded citizen and the self-interested individual.

In order to achieve victory, parties have aimed to unite entirely diverse groups, such as the 'KHAM alliance' in Gujarat of Kshatriyas, Harijans (SCs), Adivasis (STs) and Muslims, which aims to topple entrenched power for the benefit of all concerned. This is not a natural state of affairs, as generally caste affiliation is by *jati* not by *varna*; however, the latter provides an all-India framework and a convenient symbol of oppression for politicians to rail against.

Muslims play an interesting part in the conflict, despite their position outside the caste system. In order to legitimate itself and its Brahminical Hindutva ideology, the BJP is forced to perpetuate the myth of a 'united Hinduism', aiming to prevent SCs, STs and OBCs from rising against upper-caste Hindus. At the same time as the BJP are apparently embracing 'all Hindus', they are solidifying the social order and hierarchy. In order to do this, they foment religious agitation against Muslims, providing a common enemy or religious 'other' for all Hindus to define themselves against. Bose talks of the BJP's

“desperate imperative to unite a hopelessly divided and fractured ‘nation’ by invoking the common threat allegedly posed by the pan-Islamic fundamentalist conspiracy”

This squares well with the BJP’s anti-secularist attacks on Congress’s ‘appeasement of minorities’ at the expense of the majority. According to Fox, caste and communal violence have a ‘symbiotic relationship’. Muralidharan claims that caste conflicts have “cleaved the monolithic façade of [mythical] Hindu unity right down the middle”. Both the 1980s Gujarat riots and those in 1990 (against the implementation of the Mandal Commission report) mutated, with encouragement by the BJP, into lethal violence against Muslims throughout northern India.

In conclusion, the intensity of the recent violence cannot be explained purely by reference to deep-seated caste conflicts within Indian society. Recent political and economic changes have increased the upper castes’ fear of the majority, and increased the desire of OBCs and other economically disadvantaged groups to be included in any reservation settlement. Populist politicians on both sides of the debate have exploited this tension, allowing argument over policy to degenerate into ethnic and sectarian violence.

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