

India's caste-ridden psyche

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The caste system has become a permanent feature of the social, political, and material dimensions of Indian reality. The effects of the caste system permeate not merely the dynamics of redistribution, but also recognition and representation. While, certain measures have been implemented to mitigate the ill and adverse effects of the caste system on the processes of economic redistribution, the effects on the issues of recognition and representation remain both understudied and neglected.

One of the critical dimensions of a caste-ridden psyche is the generation of self-contempt among those suffering under the caste hierarchy. The caste system reproduces itself when the victims themselves believe that they are not worthy of respect. This belief is fuelled through various rituals and philosophical propositions, such as *karma* theory, that are converted into common sense and through other related, performative dimensions of the caste system. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who has been the leading proponent of the struggles against caste-based discrimination and was the architect of the Indian Constitution, was one of the few Dalit (i.e., former untouchables) leaders who realized the importance and the interconnection between all three dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation.

In fact, it was around the issue of how much/how to combine the material with the cultural or psychological that Ambedkar and Gandhi strongly differed. Gandhian strategy almost replaced the issue of the material with the moral, while Ambedkar attempted to combine the two and look for ways where one did not negate the other. He, therefore, argued for strong state intervention and the implementation of welfare measures to achieve material amelioration. He put forward the policy of reservations, or affirmative action, in jobs (economic), education (social), and parliament (political). Ambedkar was conscious that

anti-caste struggles were not merely about achieving a few jobs; the struggle was to regain “dignity,” “honour,” and “title deeds” (property). While, on one hand, he wanted to use the power of caste as a community, on the other hand, he proposed the large-scale conversion of Dalits to Buddhism, to have them move outside the fold of Hinduism.

RESERVATIONS AGAINST RECOGNITION: DEEPLY CONFLICTED

The system of reservations refers to a policy framework that allows for jobs and seats in government-run institutions to be reserved—as quotas—in proportion to the population of the so-called lower castes, including the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes. It was decided at the time of the Constitution-making process that 23 percent would be reserved for the so-called lower-caste groups.

India has, since then, been following this provision and implementing what has come to be referred to as reservations. The wide-scale belief was that such a policy would provide new opportunities for the disadvantaged social

groups, and produce, in due course, elites who could effectively represent the interests of the Dalits. However, the policies of affirmative action or reservations seem to create an inherent conflict between the processes of redistribution and the demands for recognition. While it is a fact that the policies of reservation have created new opportunities for the specific disadvantaged social groups, these however have come at a cost of causing the intangible injury of mis-recognition. The result is to mark the most disadvantaged class as inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more. In time, such a class can come to appear privileged, the receipt of special treatment and underserved largesse. Thus, an approach aimed at redressing injustices of distribution can end up creating injustices of recognition.

A TROUBLED ELITE LEADERSHIP

Moreover, the elites produced out of the system of reservations themselves remained stigmatized—seen to be less meritorious and enjoying undue benefits at the cost of the nation’s resources. In spite of various struggles and new mobilization strategies, Dalits in India continue to be stigmatized and continue to face new forms of discrimination in the modern public sphere, institutions of higher learning, the market, and civil society.

For example, when Dalits join institutions of higher learning such as a university like Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, they continue to be socially discriminated against in terms of their patterns of socialization—they face difficulties with English as a medium of education and teaching, among many other problems. These limitations further reinforce their sense of stigma. In order for democracy in India to have substantive meaning, this question must be answered: how can Dalits overcome stigma and attain a civic status that allows them to enjoy liberty, equality, and fraternity?

CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION FOR “BACKWARD CLASSES”: THE SECOND DEMOCRATIC SURGE

Signposts to such an emancipation may well lie in the new sociological and political changes that India is currently witnessing. Perhaps what the Dalit struggles since independence could not achieve may well be possible with these changes. The foremost among these changes is the new wave of reservations that India has adopted since the 1990s. The Constitution of India, along with reservations to the Dalits, provides the scope to reserve opportunities to “backward classes.” The Constitution, under article 340, provides provision for a commission to look into the issue of “backward classes.”

Until the First Backward Classes Commission was set up in 1953, there was no definition or method of identifying which social groups constituted these classes and what role caste had. The Janata government in 1977 set up the Mandal Commission, which argued that class in many senses in India approximates caste; it identified 3,743 caste groups as “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs), comprising 52 percent of the total population. However, the Mandal Commission report faced resistance and the Janata government failed to implement its recommendations because it lost power to Congress by the time the report was published. It was only in 1990 that the V.P. Singh government took up the recommendations and announced the report’s implementation.

This new wave of reservations—also referred to as the “second democratic upsurge”—I believe, is set to change the stigma attached to the discourse of reservations in India. This may be possible, first as a result of the reservations to the OBCs, part of which are politically and economically powerful. For the first time in India, an already existing elite section of the population would be part of the “reserved category.”

WHAT DO DALITS WANT?

Demands from dominant groups (caste groups such as Jats and Rajputs) are

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gradually making reservations a more generalized feature of the Indian polity, rather than being identified with any specific caste, community, or class. This, in turn, makes it very difficult for the so-called forward or upper castes to denounce or stigmatize the discourse of reservations. Instead, this debate has headed in the direction of “reverse social osmosis” by seeking reservations for the poor among the upper castes.

There is now a proposal in India to provide 5 percent reservations for the poor among the Brahmins. A proposal for 33 percent reservations for women in Parliament is pending, and it is expected that the Parliament will pass it soon. Various proposals to reserve opportunities for Muslims, based on the findings of the Sachar Committee, for disabled individuals, and for other disadvantaged sections of the society are the focus of the recently established Equal Opportunities Commission.

QUOTAS: A TIME-SENSITIVE ISSUE

A second reason why the stigma attached to reservations may be weakening is that the reservations policy for OBCs has introduced the new “creamy layer” criterion. This means that those above a certain income (in this case, Rs 4.5 lakh per annum) are not eligible to receive reservations. This not only removes elites and well-to-do social groups from receiving the benefits of reservations,

but it also introduces the idea that reservations are a time-bound and not a permanent mechanism. Even Ambedkar argued that the reservations for the scheduled classes and scheduled tribes needed to be restricted to a period of ten years, although he had restricted this criterion to the case of reservations in political representation. We need to revisit this issue to see whether the time-bound criterion can be applied to the reservations for Dalits in jobs and higher education. Time-bound reservations seem to be necessary to achieve both redistribution and recognition.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: WILL IT BE SUCCESSFUL?

Finally, OBCs approach the idea of merit very differently. The Dalits, for various reasons, dichotomized reservations and merit into two distinct compartments. Most argue that the very idea of merit is bogus—a fraudulent construct of the upper castes. However, they do not provide an alternative basis for the working of public institutions. So, in the process, Dalits remain permanent “outsiders” to public institutions. The question remains unanswered as to whether institutions can play their role and whether reservations alone will serve their purpose merely by giving proportional representation to individuals who belong to the so-called lower castes.

However, the OBCs seem to be combining reservations, competition, efficiency, and merit in new ways that are not mutually exclusive. Those who lack opportunities can also be meritorious if given the chance. Is it not important that there are further mechanisms, such as teaching extra English courses, so that everyone can perform well within the system? This new-found confidence can go a long way in refuting the attempts to stigmatize certain social groups as inherently and innately “backward.”

The process of achieving recognition and overcoming stigma will not only give fuller meaning to the dignity and participation of Dalits in the Indian polity, but it will also strengthen India’s democracy.

