



The demand for OBC status by the Patels in Gujarat has brought the issue of caste-based reservation to the fore and the otherwise not so faint anti-reservation murmurs are now being further amplified to demand total abolition of caste-based reservation in education and government jobs. Simultaneously there are several myths and false information being circulated on social media to intensify this demand, overlooking the affirmative principles of justice that reservation aims to serve. Before arriving at any impulsive conclusions, one needs to take cognizance of the socio-historical context of Indian society in order to understand the necessity of caste-based reservation.

Contrary to popular misconception, reservation is not a policy that was introduced post-1947; it existed in various forms even during British rule. The earliest implementation of reservations were carried out by social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Shahu Maharaj for free education to non-Brahmin students in 1891 and 1901 respectively. In 1932, the British government announced separate electorates for the Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and Dalits in British India. The Dalits, i.e. depressed classes, were assigned a number of seats to be filled by election from special constituencies in which only voters belonging to the depressed classes could vote. This move was supported by many leaders among the marginalized communities, most notably by Dr. Ambedkar. M.K. Gandhi feared separate electors for Dalits since that would fracture the Hindu majority he was trying to manufacture. Hence he opposed it, and threatened to end his life in protest by resorting to an indefinite hunger strike. In an agreement that has come to be known as the Poona Pact, Ambedkar succumbed to Gandhi's arm-twisting and agreed to have a single Hindu electorate, on the condition that Dalits would have seats reserved within it.

A major step in post-1947 India was the implementation of recommendations made by the Mandal Commission in 1989 to consider the question of reservations and quotas to redress caste discrimination. The commission eleven social, economic, and educational indicators to determine backwardness. According to the provisions made by Mandal commission, members of lower castes (SCs, STs and Non-creamy layer OBCs) were given exclusive access to a certain portion of government jobs and slots in public universities, and recommended changes to these quotas, increasing them to 50%. These recommendations were

implemented in 1989 by the then Janata Party government which received harsh criticism, mostly from upper caste communities, that continues till date. One of the myth that is being circulated is that the reservation policy that was introduced after India became a republic were meant to continue only for ten years. This is not entirely true. The ten year period for reservations was only for political reservations, ie in houses of the parliament and state assemblies. The reservations in jobs and educational institutes do not have a specified time limit.

Caste identity has historically deprived the possibility of economic and social mobility to those born in the lower ranks of caste hierarchy. Traditionally, avenues of education were available to a few upper caste communities and thus they were ahead of others in upward mobility. This disproportionate access to minimum educational facilities across the country continues today, holding back students belonging to dalit bahunjan background from acquiring knowledge and other skills. Those criticizing caste-based reservations, mainly the upper castes, often ignore the hurdles of social mobility that lower caste communities have to face every day. There have been instances reported wherein upper caste teachers have refused to even check notebooks of dalit students. Not to mention the discouragement and humiliation dalit-bahunjan students face in educational institutions, regardless of one's economic status. In such scenario, the argument that merit or economic backwardness should be given preference over caste is rendered irrelevant.

It is important to note that caste-based reservation is not the only form of reservation in India. There is provision for reservations for person with disabilities, wards of freedom fighters/NRIs/Army personnel, single girl child etc. In many ways, there is already provision for class-based reservation. But these forms of reservation never receive the severe criticism which caste-based reservation does. It affirms that the problem upper castes have is not with reservations as such but with being deprived of their entitlements and privileges. This is exemplified in the case of Patels. Patels are a land-owning, affluent and a dominant community in Gujarat today. They do not have the disempowered status of most of the communities in the Mandal Commission list and are fairly represented in institutions of power. Thus their demand for inclusion in the OBC is unjustified, much like the Jats of Haryana and Marathas of Maharashtra.

Inequality is at the very foundation of India's social structure, and remains so even today.

The argument by anti-reservation lobbies that abolishing reservation will bring in an equal footing for all holds no ground. In fact, it is only by ensuring reservations for the marginalized that we can aim for a society that is less exclusionary. Upper castes form a minor portion of India's total population numerically but continue to dominate all spaces in the public and civic sphere. Caste based reservation is a way to flatten this dominance of upper castes by ensuring better representation of all communities, and hence should be unstintingly supported.

(First published in *The Goan Everyday*, dt: 15 September, 2015)



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