

By AMITA KANEKAR



Should children of freedom fighters be gifted government jobs? Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, in a recent public event, handed over letters offering government jobs to 42 'children of freedom fighters', and announced that a further 90 more will be handed over by December 19, making a total of 132 of such job-offers in just these few months. These offers are the result of the reservation in government jobs for this group of people, part of the official policy of reservations for various sections of society. Within a few hours, however, at least one recipient announced his refusal of the offer, saying that he is comfortably off and does not need a government job. His statement was celebrated by a section of social media, implying that other beneficiaries of reservations (especially, one is sure, caste-based reservations) should learn from him.

All of this begs the question: who and what are reservations for? As per the Constitution of India, reservations - in government jobs, education, and legislatures - are required in order to ensure representation of all sections of society in positions of power. Given the strength and endurance of the caste system till today, this policy was intended to provide a level playing field and take a step to correct historic injustices to those communities listed as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes (OBC). Such affirmative action is to be found in many countries of the world, for precisely the same reason, i.e. to minimize inequality and counter historical discrimination based on caste, race, colour, gender, geographical location, etc.

How do reservations for the children of freedom fighters fit into this? Have these persons faced historical or current discrimination of any sort? I have not come across any hard data on this, but my guess would be no. It should not be too difficult to find out the social background of all those listed as freedom fighters in Goa - and to confirm my estimate that a large percentage belongs to elite sections of society, especially dominant castes like the Saraswats. Other privileged castes would surely figure in the list too, like Vanis, Desais, and Catholic Bamons and Chardos, but Saraswats would almost surely be the most.

There are good reasons for such an estimate. Many scholars have pointed out how elite sections are good at getting themselves included in any respected grouping, like anti-colonial struggles. But it is also true that the dominant castes were actually involved in the anti-colonial movement, in Goa and in former British-India too. G. Aloysius (1998) has pointed that late 19th-century British India saw, not one, but two kinds of nationalist movements: the cultural nationalism of the dominant castes who saw their own Brahmanical past and culture as making them the natural successors to the British; and the political nationalism of the Bahujan castes, which was about political rights, mass education, equal opportunities, etc. Of the two, it is the nationalism of the dominant castes that was successful, and went on to be

celebrated post-1947, making dominant castes, and especially Hindu ones, into prominent freedom-fighters and nationalists, while radical ideologues and champions of social justice and civil rights from the so-called lower castes, like the Phules, Dr. B R Ambedkar, Ayyankali, and many others, were portrayed as lesser beings, and almost ignored in official circles.

In Goa, you see this difference too, going well back into history. The dominant-caste gaocars of Cuncolim and the soldiers of Adilshah (a Muslim dynasty) both fought the Portuguese in the 16th century, with the latter even driving out Albuquerque once. But only the former are called freedom-fighters. Many 19th-century Catholic Goans participated in electoral politics in the face of violent opposition, fought for a free press and used it to sharply criticise the government, and contributed to the spread of the ideals and practices of constitutional liberalism, but are practically unknown even in Goa. The Ranés of Sattari, meanwhile, who also opposed the government on various issues around the same time, mostly for retaining their own feudal powers and privileges (De Souza 1987), are regularly celebrated as freedom-fighters. There are also communities like the Nabhiks (Parobo 2020) whose 19th-century struggle against the dominance of the Saraswats, and for the advancement of their own community socially, educationally, and ritually, has gone unnoticed by most writings documenting the struggles of colonial times. The freedoms that they sought, and even achieved, do not make them freedom-fighters for our times.

All in all, freedom-fighter is a title with a selected definition, and bestowed on selected people. But let us come back to reservations. When reservations were clearly intended to be a step to ensure representation of all communities in positions of power, how do the children of freedom-fighters qualify, when many of them belong to the most dominant and over-represented castes in every important position in our society?

Plus, if one looks at how reservations are implemented for the actually discriminated-against and under-represented communities, you find the 'creamy layer' concept, which denies benefits to those from the OBC communities who are found to be economically above a certain limit. But there is no creamy layer cut-off for the freedom-fighters' children, so much so that it was left for one of the grantees to point out to the government that he happened to be the owner of a very successful business and needed no government job.

So, you have our government offering a reserved job to a successful businessman, when so many reserved positions due to genuinely vulnerable communities are lying unfilled! This in a situation where getting a decent job has become a painful struggle and dream for many Goans. But there's nothing to be surprised about here either. After all, we now have the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) reservations as well, which are specifically for those who do NOT belong to the vulnerable or discriminated-against communities, but based purely on

economic criteria. And these economic are far less stringent than the creamy layer restriction on the OBC castes - so that you can dominant caste and from a family which earns quite well, and still get a reserved position, while an OBC candidate whose family earns less will not be eligible for reservation at all.

Clearly, what all this adds up to is a second and more devastating attack on the whole concept of reservations. The first was by not implementing them for those who need them the most, while this second is to hollow them out from within, by offering everything to those who already have it.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 13 August 2023)



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