



## Caste-based Reservation: Reflection of Systemic Maladies

**T**he Frankenstein's monster of caste-based reservation in government and non-government jobs and academic institutions keeps rising from the ashes like the proverbial Phoenix. The issue which needs discussion and reflection is that as to whether we really need such a thing called reservation. Caste-based reservation should have been discontinued within ten years of the proclamation of the Indian Constitution. But if we still have to contend with the reservation demon, the reason lies in our failure to ensure an equitable and egalitarian process of value allocations, thereby necessitating the continued existence of the caste-based system.

The truth is that something as obnoxious as caste-based reservation should not have been there at all in the first instance, but as they say *a la* Aristotle and many others that 'equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally'. And in a society wracked by myriad societal divisions including those of caste, some remedial measures were required for sure to restore the societal balance before each citizen is able to have an equal opportunity for one's personal growth.

After all, you cannot expect those discriminated against for thousands of years to be treated equally with those sections of the society who have dominated the societal pecking order for aeons. If some of us proffer the argument of merit and competence and say that all the sections of the society should be treated equally, the same emanates from the prejudices inherited by us as member of an ossified social hierarchy to which we belong. We may not even be aware of such prejudices, but still we pronounce and advance them convincingly simply because they suit our own vested interests. After all, there is a world of difference between the societal stratum at the top and bottom of the society in terms of competence, social confidence, cultural capital, social surroundings, appreciation of varied societal realities and opportunities, understanding of their own self-interests, and even genetic make-up.

So, reservation in the garb of 'affirmative discrimination' was needed in the first instance is something beyond doubt, if at all, to facilitate and prepare a level playing field to all sections of the society. But then, its continued existence can be explained only in terms of competitive and populist politics coupled with an innate inability of our political parties to find better issues for mass mobilisation. Had we succeeded in providing the weaker and marginalised sections of our society with all the bare minimum necessities of human existence, the same people would have revolted against such a system or, at least, the issue of reservation would have ceased to matter in Indian politics.

But the fact remains that even today we have not been able to provide the quality education and health services to all, particularly those on the margins of the society. It has created a status gulf in terms of competence and abilities between the privileged and not-so-privileged sections of the Indian society. The weaker section of the society is naturally disadvantaged vis-à-vis the socially dominant not only because of a long historical discrimination, but also because of the systemic biases and prejudices heaped against them. Since we could not ensure quality education and health services to them all these sixty years of our independence whereby they could have competed on equal footing with the historically privileged sections of the society, hence the reservation genie keeps popping out of the bottle.

We know it very well that in a democracy it is the numbers which count. When the weak and underprivileged in an underdeveloped democratic society are left to fend for themselves, they quite naturally fall back on the strength of their numbers. The social demography then starts dictating politics and numbers start doubling up as a resource to be capitalised on for the purpose of improving one's societal status. That is what has been happening in India for quite some time, seeing the rise of many caste-based political parties and interest groups.

If we take a look at the turn of recent political developments, we would find that political parties have become more specialised, representing more or less their caste constituents and the latter also somehow gives credence to such parties in the hope of getting a better deal. So, democratic expression and representation have taken a grotesque turn in Indian society in the form of caste-based reservation and politics. That is why, India being a plural society of different societal groups is today governed by a coalition government whose constituents are invariably the representatives of different societal groups. Such groups have been feeding and fattening on identity politics which has been on ascendance in recent times.

These are all the signs of a backward and retrograde society. But such parochial thinking shall continue to dominate our political culture until and unless we succeed in promising and ensuring a real level playing field for all sections of the society. Investment in one's human resources is the first condition for the healthy growth of any society. Recognising this fact, John Stuart Mill had remarked long back, 'You cannot think of becoming a great country with small men with small capacities, small thinking and dubious character.'

Caste-based reservation, however, also has had a functional role in our social system, negative though it may appear *prima facie*. Be it noted that many of India's time twins in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean have fallen by the wayside in their developmental march. But if India has been growing from strength to strength, the reason somewhere also

lies in the way India has tried to balance the different societal forces through a consociational system whereby societal values have been judiciously allocated amongst different sections and strata of the Indian society. So, while many of these societies saw bloody revolution resulting either in their break-up or their getting reduced to the status of 'a failed society', India has been experiencing a 'passive revolution' where positive changes have come gradually, through different pulls and pressures, almost to the satisfaction of all.

The recent Supreme Court judgement to exclude the creamy layer from the benefits of reservation should be welcomed, but the exclusion should also be extended to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, because what is sauce for the goose ought to be the sauce for the gander. The argument which applies to OBCs for exclusion of its creamy layer from the reservation benefits also applies *mutatis mutandis* to the creamy layer from SCs/STs. However, the concept and criteria of the creamy layer itself suffers from many anomalies and it is advisable to revise and rationalise the same realistically and judiciously.

Even though caste-based reservation is an anachronism today, but it is part of our social reality and is likely to continue till we can actually claim to have guaranteed the underprivileged and marginalised sections of our society the bare minimum of civic facilities and necessities including quality education and health services. A system of equal opportunities coupled with a reasonably egalitarian and equitable society is what is required before we can hope to hammer the last nail in the coffin of the politics of caste-based reservation.

### Salient Points

- Initially, affirmative discrimination was needed to facilitate and prepare a level playing field to all sections of the society.
- However, populist politics coupled with an inability of our political parties to find better issues for mass mobilisation has been the driving force.
- India being a plural society of different societal groups is today governed by a coalition government of caste based political parties.
- Investment in one's human resources is the first condition for the healthy growth of any society.
- India has been experiencing a 'passive revolution' where positive changes have come gradually almost to the satisfaction of all sections of society.
- Exclusion of creamy layer should also be extended to the SCs and STs.
- Minimum civic facilities, equal opportunities and reasonably equitable society is required to end politics of caste based reservation.

### Glossary

**Frankenstein's monster:** a fictional character whose fictional creator was Victor Frankenstein

**Phoenix:** a long-lived bird that is cyclically regenerated or reborn

**Obnoxious:** highly objectionable

**Proffer:** offer

**Ossified:** hardened like

**Grotesque:** odd or unnatural

**Consociational:** the act of uniting in association