

Beyond For or Against Exploring the Complexities of Reservation Policy

by

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With the announcement of the Lok Sabha elections, the issue of caste based job reservations once again came to the fore. The Janata Dal government had come under vicious attack when in August 1990 it declared its intention to implement the recommendation of the Mandal Commission that 27 percent of government jobs be reserved for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). As a counter measure the BJP intensified its Ram Mandir campaign so that they could disprove the assumption behind the reservation policy that the Hindu population is a vast

heterogeneity with many conflicting interests. The ferocity of the anti-reservation movement along with the

communal violence that spread as a consequence of the Ram Mandir movement brought down the V.P. Singh government within months of assuming office.

A Populist Measure

When the 1991 elections were announced it was to be expected that the Janata Dal and other parties constituting the National Front would make the reservation issue central to their election campaign in their effort to consolidate certain castes as their vote bank even though in their latest manifesto they promise a review of the Mandal recommendations. But it is noteworthy that the Congress and the BJP have once again included the pledge

of reservations in their manifestos (with minor modifications), even though they are known to have lent all manner of support to the anti reservation agitation that shook the country last year. (They had committed themselves to a similar supportive position in their 1989 election manifestos).

This is undoubtedly an expression of political opportunism. But there is more to it than that.

The inability of the BJP and Congress to disown the reservation policy for OBCs even though they were actively helping the anti-reservation movement is proof

●that in democratic politics no political party can resist populist postures.

●that the increasing tendency of parties to indulge in overblown rhetoric and wild promises at the time of elections, without a matching commitment and capacity to translate those promises into action is due to lack of sufficient accountability in our political system.

One of the most often repeated criticisms levelled against the V.P. Singh government for announcing the implementation of reservation policy was that this was merely a 'populist' measure for the purpose of consolidating a particular vote bank. The word 'populism' came to be used simply as a pejorative. The dictionary defines populism as "a political philosophy directed to the needs of the common people and advocating a more equitable distribution of wealth and power." The word owes its origin to the philosophy of the Populist Party, a U.S. political party formed to represent agrarian interests in the Presidential election of 1892, also called the People's Party.

No democracy can function meaningfully without politicians feeling pressured to be responsive to the needs of their vote banks—or for that matter attempting to represent well defined interests consolidated through vote banks. This is one way the vote acquires meaning and importance for ordinary people. By getting organised as vote banks, even the relatively disadvantaged can hope to have some influence on government policies.

Therefore, the pressure towards 'populist' measures (in the sense of responding to the needs of the common people and advocating a more equitable distribution of wealth and power) should not be seen only in negative terms. However, populism can acquire a negative dimension when:

●the idea of social justice is reduced to political gimmicks and no meaningful redistribution of resources and power actually takes place;

●when overblown rhetoric becomes a substitute for well-worked policies;

when measures announced are seen as temporary palliatives to garner votes at times of election without any real intention to implement effective measures;

●when the interests of even larger groups of similarly disadvantaged people are overlooked consistently and policies are devised to win over only those groups who have political clout;

●when the leadership lacks the ability to give creative direction to popular sentiments. If the leadership fails to channel the aspirations of their vote banks or support base in a way that goes beyond mere symptomatic redressal of group grievances towards evolving a more viable and healthy social and political balance, populism can assume very negative overtones.

However, the critique of the urban elite who led or lent support to the anti-reservation movement was not inspired by concern for a more accountable and a more socially responsible polity. It seems to have been motivated by the fear of the growing power of organised vote banks of groups lower down the social hierarchy. For example, when certain Janata Dal leaders defended their action with the plea that they were merely implementing one of the key promises made in their election manifesto, leading editors and academics cynically argued: "Whoever takes the election manifestos seriously?" Behind their contemptuous dismissal of 'populist' measures was a sense of outrage that, as the self-appointed arbiters of the country's destiny, they were being bypassed.

In recent years the increasing power of the media, controlled by the urban educated upper caste elite, has given newspaper writers and sundry intellectuals an exaggerated sense of their worth and importance. They have come to believe that the business of politicians is to read newspaper editorials and articles and implement the advice given therein—that no other social group needs to be listened to except when it gets its demands approved by

and routed through academics and journalists. Their sense of outrage at being bypassed by the V.P. Singh government was so strong that they openly instigated the anti-reservation agitation encouraging the young impressionable students to believe that they were making heroic sacrifices for a noble cause even when the agitation assumed violent and suicidal forms. (See p. 55 for a review of media's role.)

Cynical Opportunism

However, even the most vigorous defenders of the reservation policy cannot deny that there was something very cynical about the manner and timing of its announcement, on the eve of a show of strength rally being organised by Devi Lal and company, in an obvious bid to outmanoeuvre this lobby within the Janata Dal. It had elements of gang warfare with rival gang leaders trying to enhance their clout by encouraging defections from each other's gangs by offering a bigger share of the booty. This perhaps was one reason the reservation announcement evoked the kind of violent response it did. It was widely perceived as an insincere gimmick, and not altogether without reason, for when the Janata Dal government was faced with very determined opposition, they kept diluting the Mandal Commission recommendations (for example, defence services and research establishments were exempted and state governments were allowed to decide their own policy), so much so that at the end, very few sectors were left where reservations would apply. Moreover, since most of the Janata Dal leaders had a history of unsavoury political deals, they were notable to convince their opponents that their commitment to social justice was genuine.

The politics of vote banks often tends to sharpen conflicts between contending social groups. This is not entirely avoidable in a democracy. Yet in a diverse and multiethnic society like ours, it is crucial that leaders who wish to initiate measures for the redistribution

of social and economic power, possess the skills to evolve some measure of social consensus and inspire political confidence in various sections of the population, especially those who are not to be direct beneficiaries of their policies. If they are seen as *merely* thinking of ways to acquire or stay in power through crudely worked out populist measures, then they are much less likely to be able to evolve a measure of social consensus about the desirability of affecting redistribution of power in society. The cause of the betterment/empowerment of the relatively disadvantaged sections has to be believed to be a desirable *social* goal (as opposed to being a mere *sectional* demand) for which at least sections of the elite are won over to the extent that they are willing to make space for the rising aspirations of groups lower down the social hierarchy. If the major contending groups are mobilised as inherently and permanently hostile camps and are unable to work out a meaningful consensus, a democratic polity cannot be sustained for long.

Idealism or Self Aggrandisement

While a small section of the student community may have joined the anti-reservation movement out of idealism, by and large the opposition to job reservations was based on defending narrow sectional interests. Women students shouting slogans like “we don’t want *rickshawallahs* or unemployed men as our husbands” gave a clear message that caste considerations remain paramount in the marriage market and that they would not consider marrying ‘lower caste’ men even if they had good jobs. Likewise, male students made a show of shining shoes, selling vegetables and polishing cars to drive home the message that they would be driven to performing such ‘degrading’ menial jobs if the reservation policy came to be implemented. They displayed open contempt for all the disadvantaged sections who do these jobs every day. Those who romanticised and glorified the student protest by comparing it to

the May ’68 student revolt in France or the recent pro-democracy protest by the Chinese students at Tienanmen Square, overlooked the fact that the anti-reservationist students were not inspired by any vision of a new, more egalitarian society. Unlike the French and Chinese students, they were not protesting against power and privilege and securing greater democratic participation. They simply wanted to retain a clear monopoly of high status jobs for the upper caste, upper class. Among university teachers one often hears vicious comments like: “Now we will be compelled to marry our daughters to *churhas* and *chamars* since they will be the only ones to get jobs.” Khushwant Singh in one of his columns went as far as to say that job reservation for OBCs was acceptable as long as it was confined to the jobs of peons and drivers, at the most clerks. But Class I and II services should not be touched by the reservation scheme. It is sad that even when they were involved in defending nothing more noble than their narrow sectional interests the anti-reservationists self-righteously projected them as ‘national interests.’

A Divisive Move?

In order to provide respectability to their fight for self-interest, one of the main arguments used by the leaders and ideologues of the anti-reservation movement was that caste-based reservations would divide the nation into warring caste groups and undermine ‘national unity’. The continuing hold of caste identities was presented as an unhealthy hangover from the so-called feudal past. It was argued that this negative legacy had to be rooted out in order for India to qualify as a unified modern society.

The opponents of caste-based reservations come predominantly from among the upper caste English educated elite and the ideologues of the BJP-VHP-RSS combine. These two in recent years have become strong allies in the cause of a strong, centralised, authoritarian polity. For most of the English educated

elite, national unity is synonymous with their own pan-Indian dominance. This group has emerged in the last 100 years or so as a distinct caste claiming superiormost rights. Even though its members are drawn from varied sections of upper castes, the non-English speaking members of those castes rarely belong to this exclusive club. The way power was transferred from the hands of the British to Indians ensured the continuance of a narrow segment of elite whose power was chiefly based on controlling: the centralised, bureaucratic machinery. Near total monopoly of jobs in the IAS, IPS, central and state services and the military as well as managerial positions in key public sector institutions, gave them the unrestrained power.

Their desire to control all of the country from the Delhi *Bhavans* has brought them into conflict time and again with aspirations of people excluded from power and privilege in different parts of the country. Every time they face any resistance to their imperial status, they dub the group opposing their dominance as ‘anti-national’, be it a regional group demanding political decentralisation or a group pressing for its economic interests or for recognition of its linguistic identity. Interestingly, the BJP-RSS-VHP vision of a strong ‘Hindu Rashtra’ fits in admirably with this imperial vision. Hence the two have been able to forge a close alliance, with many of the English educated elite actually joining the ranks of the BJP in recent years. These two groups share a common obsession. They both want to bring about ‘national unity’ by convincing people to disown all other competing identities based on caste, language, religion, region and other ethnic solidarities. They see these multiple loyalties as the cause of all of India’s problems just as the British rulers once did, and for pretty much the same reasons. These crosscutting identities make the people of this country difficult to govern through *diktats* of the Delhi

Durbar. People's own requirements and aspirations seem to move in directions contrary to those desired by the hegemonic elite, who like the British, want to remould the people of this country into becoming one mindless monolith called 'Indians', blindly obeying the rulers at the Centre, subordinating their own well being to the leaders' commands.

Intolerance of People's Multiple Identities

The assumption behind this homogenising effort is that once the people become 'proper Indians' overcoming other loyalties, they will learn to put 'the nation before self,' which is really a euphemism for learning to obey quietly whatever the ruling elite demand of them—be it getting oneself sterilised in order to meet the norm set by the government of one child family for the poor, or willing acquiescence to the suspension of the democratic rights of people in Punjab, Kashmir or Nagaland in the name of safeguarding 'national interests.'

The intolerance of the multiple identities held important by the people comes under the garb of progressivism, liberalism, modernism, nationalism. But at the core of it is authoritarian statism based on deep contempt for the people. It is time we asked: what is so morally superior about identifying oneself solely as an Indian as opposed to feeling a strong sense of identity as a Punjabi or a Jat or a Vokkaligga? In fact, one can't be an Indian without belonging to a specific community, Maratha, Marwari, Parsis or Kayastha. Yet we are continually being exhorted to eviscerate our other identities in the all-consuming one of being 'Indian', as though that in itself represents a higher state of evolution and moral superiority. The 'national unity' mongers wish to destroy all the cultural and social specificities of Indian society. They wish to refashion Indian society on the basis of their poorly grasped ideas of what makes western societies dominant—just what the British rulers

tried to do.

For the BJP-RSS-VHP combine this obsession takes the form of trying to 'unite' the diverse people of India into undimensional creatures called Hindu *Rashtravadis*. They want them to 'become one' like they imagine Germans or Japanese to be one people without realising that whenever and wherever attempts have been made to unite people in a monolith, it has led to warfare and violence. The leftists and liberals would like to see caste and other ethnic identities give way to a textbook version of class identity of the kind they think exists in the West, along with a strong national identity.

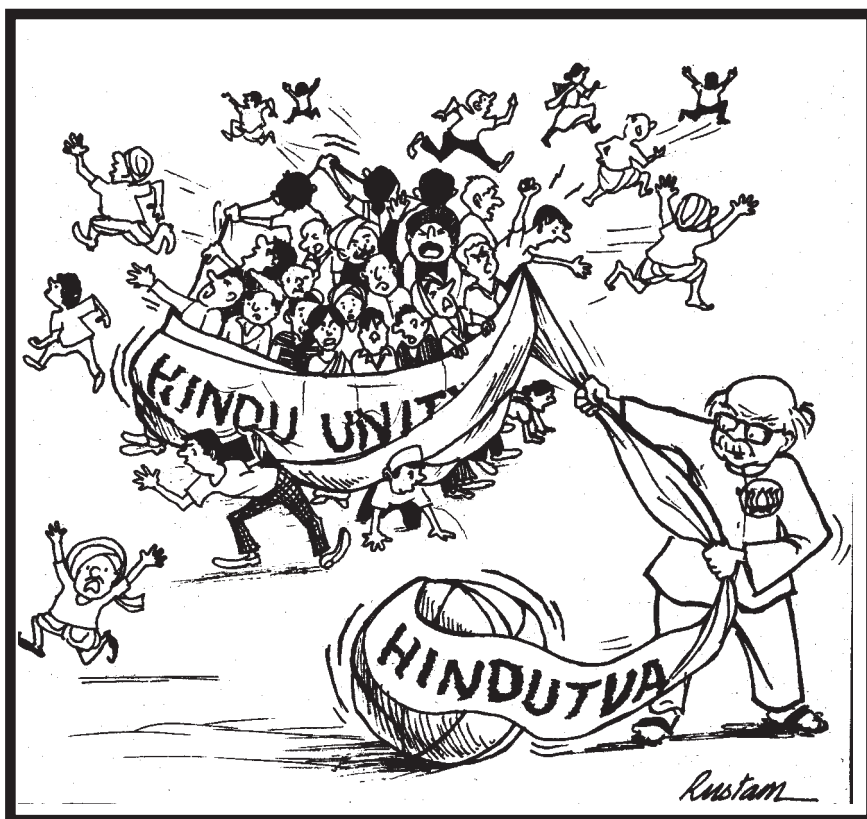
Both want people to worship the national flag and the Constitution instead of worshipping this or that deity or holy book. Both are uncomfortable with the people of India as they are and have adopted theoretical models of western societies for emulation.

Safeguard against Authoritarianism

While the negative aspects of ethnic

identities have been overemphasized, we have seldom recognised the positive role they have played in our society and polity. They have played a key role in giving democracy real roots and in resisting centralised, authoritarian power structures imposed by the ruling elite.

Every Indian has a multiplicity of identities that are equally dear and deep rooted. This acts as the most effective check against the emergence of pan-Indian tyrants whose writ can run across the length and breadth of the country. All such megalomaniac politicians find their grand designs frustrated at the borders of contending identities. For example, the RSS-BJP-VHP Shiv Sena attempts to unify all Hindus under one umbrella gets automatically thwarted because every Hindu is simultaneously rooted in his or her linguistic, regional and caste identity, in addition to a distinct identity as a member of one of the numerous sects within the Hindu fold. A Hindu is no less attached to being



a Punjabi or a TAMILIAN and further on — a Punjabi Khatri or a Punjabi Jat — a TAMILIAN Brahmin or a TAMILIAN Mudaliar, a Punjabi from Doab or one who migrated from Lahore, a Punjabi Nirankari, Radhasoami, Arya Samaji or a Mazhabi. A TAMILIAN Brahmin is likely to feel a greater sense of commonality with a TAMILIAN non-Brahmin than with a Brahmin from Punjab or Uttar Pradesh, especially on the language issue. An Advani is unlikely to be able to convince a Mulayam Singh Yadav — no less pious a Hindu than Advani — that he should give up his struggle on behalf of certain caste groups in favour of building a new Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, or that Muslims constitute a threat to Yadav's Hindu identity more than Advani does to his political survival. Likewise, Bal Thackeray's gigantic ego gets deflated the moment he crosses the borders of Maharashtra. Even within Maharashtra he is unlikely to ever succeed in forcing the Marathas, Kunbis, Dalits and Brahmins to unite under one single political banner. **The continuing hold of these competing loyalties is India's best guarantee against dictatorship because dictatorships are based on eliminating all these loyalties.** It is not a coincidence that in 1947 India gravitated towards a democratic polity whereas Pakistan inevitably moved towards a military dictatorship as Jinnah and the Muslim League succeeded, for a while, in undermining all other identities to forge a monolithic Muslim identity, whereas the Congress party under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership provided space for the assertion of regional, linguistic and a host of other identities.

Despite serious setbacks, even today it is impossible for our society to be unified under an all-India tyrant however hard a Bal Thackeray may try. Likewise it is not possible for any hate-mongering politician to unite all Hindus against Muslims, as Hitler was able to unite the Christians against Jews in Germany — no matter how hard the BJP-RSS combine may try.

This factor of cross-cutting identities has been crucial in defining limits for authoritarian politics in India. No one *danda* can work for all of India's people. That is what makes them 'difficult to govern' and, therefore, mistrusted by the 'national unity' mongering elite.

Pluralities Protect Democracy

Among other pluralities, the much reviled caste system has played a very significant role in making Indian democracy vibrant and difficult to destroy as well as requiring some amount of redistribution of power through the democratic process. But the modern educated elite have a deep love-hate relationship with the institution of caste. On the one hand they find it difficult to bypass it in most essential matters — they marry within caste, reside in caste clusters — yet they continue to heap rhetorical abuses on it, treating it as a symbol of all that is evil and backward in Indian society. They keep asserting that the hateful caste system should be 'wiped out', as a necessary step towards modernisation. It is a very schizophrenic attitude. They are obsessed to destroy caste while at the same time clinging on to it, even enhancing its salience in many essential matters.

The English educated elite inherited its critique of Indian society from the views and writings of colonial administrators, orientalist, anthropologists and missionaries. Since they inherited it along with the imperial ambitions of the colonial rulers, it suited their interest to stick to it with vigour even after independence.

One of the key tasks for any *alien* ruling elite is to destroy the sense of self of the society it seeks to subjugate. It needs to compel the people to adopt as *their own self view* the contemptuous view that alien rulers have of them. Hence, the colonial rulers had launched a vigorous, well orchestrated attack on all aspects of Indian society — its learning, its social and political institutions, its family life and organisation. Everything that was

different from the habits and customs, institutions of governance and beliefs of the British was targeted for attack. For instance, the much healthier food habits followed by Brahmins and many other sections of Indian society were ridiculed, and projected as the cause of the inherent inferiority of Indians justifying their political slavery, Meat eating, for example, was held up as a sign of modern, enlightened, healthful living. So powerful was this ideological attack that meat eating became a status symbol for educated Indians - a proof of their modernity. Even Gandhi as a young boy felt compelled to try eating meat, though the very idea revolted him.

Of all the institutions, caste as a unit of social organisation came under the most severe attack - caste not as it existed but as the British portrayed it to be. The contemporary critique of the caste system that has surfaced in a virulent form with the announcement of caste-based reservations draws heavily from this colonial tradition. This is not to suggest that the division of society into castes is without problems. In fact, a much more genuine and radical critique of the caste system came from within India. The *Bhakti* movements that spread in waves from the south to the north from the sixth century to the 17th century articulated, among other things, a very strong and uncompromising voice of protest against privileges based on particular hierarchical interpretations of caste or possession of wealth. The *bhaktis* asserted the equality of all souls before god, regardless of caste and economic, status, even indicating that power and wealth were impediments to building oneness with god. They emphasised love and good deeds as much more important than knowledge gained from book learning, and denounced the self-righteousness of religious and other authority figures. The brahminical pretension to exclusive monopoly over learning and scriptures came to be ridiculed and challenged in an enduring kind of way with the

establishment of a large number of new sects which did not recognise brahminical authority.

What makes this critique more genuinely radical as compared to the one initiated by the colonial rulers is that the *bhaktis* did not arrogate to themselves the role of the super elite as did the colonial rulers and the modern English educated Indians. Many of the *bhaktis* came from so-called lower caste groups. In challenging brahminical authority they did not seek to set themselves up as alternative authority figures. They challenged all claims to superiority based on birth rather than seeking to supplant one kind with another. That is perhaps why they succeeded in inspiring large followings of people with a relatively more egalitarian vision of society and compelled brahminism to make space for the aspirations of groups lower down the social hierarchy. The *bhakti* movements left a permanent legacy of a strong and enduring counterview to the ideology of exclusive power and privilege propagated by certain dominant caste groups. In contrast, the harangues of the modern elites against caste seem to have the contrary effect of making people cling to their caste identity even more vigorously. The latter critique is not motivated by the desire to do away with privilege but to maintain an exclusive control over power and privilege. Witness the arguments of those who are upset at reservations for certain caste groups. They argue that reservations will militate against merit, implying that 'merit'

consists merely in getting a certain percentage of marks. They allege that the induction of OBCs will bring 'inefficiency' into administration and professions, will condemn the children of the elite to menial jobs like shoe polishing and will encourage less privileged groups to cling to their caste identities. The more generous among them say they are not averse to reservations on a class basis, that is, using income levels as criteria. The assumption is that class based divisions are somehow more desirable or superior, as though exploitation based on class is necessarily less obnoxious. As proof of their 'modernising' drive they are forever talking of wiping out the evil caste system in favour of a class based society. But the caste system refuses to oblige.

People cling on to their caste identities despite the onslaught of modernism. In fact, they have been consolidated and resurrected in many new forms and have made remarkable adjustments with modern institutions such as representative democracy. Caste associations are successful because they make good use of readymade traditional channels of mobilisation. Caste (in the sense of *jati* as opposed to *varna* theory) has been the most central and enduring feature of Indian society. "*Jatee nahin, voh jati*" goes a popular proverb (*jati* is that which never goes.) Its not just the so-called upper castes which cling tenaciously to their caste identity, the so-called lower castes do not seem willing to give it up either. The latter no doubt want to escape the tyrannical and abusive aspects of being

considered low caste, but do not seem willing to give up their caste identity altogether, especially in the area that gives continuity to it, namely marriage. Even lower caste groups are by and large not keen on inter caste marriage, not even with someone of the upper caste. Even those who converted to Islam or Christianity often continue to differentiate themselves from their co-religionists on the basis *affati*. Statements like: "We are Rajput Muslims or Kayastha Christians" are made commonly not just by the concerned groups in India but even in Pakistan.

Undoubtedly, there are many exploitative and degrading aspects of caste based social organisation as we know it today. Among the most shameful and brutal is the stigmatising of a number of castes as untouchables. The presumption of superiority on grounds of



... and remember, this is the last place, a Government of India Tourism poster, that you'll see all of them 'together'—and smiling!!

How *Jatis* Became Castes

'Caste' was a concept alien to the people of India. (See lower Box) It has become a reality only in post-British India due to the onset of new social and political institutions requiring new tactics for upward mobility and for acquiring social-political power. At the operational level the social system, based as it was on kinship ties expressed through *jatis*, was characterised by fissiparous tendencies tending to break down into new endogamous sub-units, leading to a continual upward, downward and sideward mobility of various old and *new jatis*. This system in no way resembled the 19th century European view of Indian society as being governed by the four main vama categories of Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Sudras, placed hierarchically in that order. They built this theoretical model from a peculiar selection of ancient texts with the help of the *pundits* and *shastris* they hired. According to their text book model, Brahmins were the dominant group in society and the only ones allowed to acquire learning. This view was not reflected in political structure of late 18th and early 19th century India, which had hardly any Brahmin dynasties. Political and military power rested in the hands of other groups in society. Many of the ruling chieftains were from what are designated as the Sudra castes. Some, like Shivaji, the famous Maratha ruler, even had their geneologies altered to successfully claim Kshatriya status, even though he was from a Sudra *jati*. Similarly, Yadavs were ruling chieftains in many areas of the North before the British took over. Yet, in conjunction with the destruction of institutions of Sanskrit learning the sheer power of incremental repetition

The Story of John Ram Singh

Ram Singh was a poor and illiterate peasant. A missionary came to live in his village and after years of persuasion succeeded in converting him to Christianity. The priest wanted to give him an altogether new name which would indicate that Ram Singh had shed his caste identity and adopted a different religion. But since Ram Singh was illiterate and simple minded, the missionary thought he may not be able to adjust or even respond to an altogether English name. Therefore, he worked out a via-media and christened him John Ram Singh.

One day while the priest was walking past the house of John Ram Singh, he saw him performing the ritual of *muhcchua* with his cow. (Among the cow worshipping groups among the Hindus, members of the family eat only after the first morsel of food cooked in the house has been offered to the cow).

The priest was very upset. All his labour would be a waste if John Ram Singh continued to observe the 'superstitious' rituals and practices associated with Hinduism. The priest indignantly asked him: "John Ram Singh, why are you performing *muhcchua*, now that you have become an Isai?"

Ram Singh was surprised and puzzled at the naivety of the question and replied: "Arre sahib, Isai ho gaye to kya hua? Dharm to nahin chhoddiya hamne apna!" (So what if I have converted to Christianity? I won't give up my *dharm** for that!)

Heard from noted film script writer, Javed.

*The word *dharm* is used here in the popular sense of the term, not to mean religion, but mean a code of conduct accepted by the concerned community, based on a notion of desirable social/individual norms of behaviour.

Who Coined Caste?

The term caste, as is well-known, was first used by the Portuguese in the early decades of the 16th century. The word itself not only embraced several meanings such as 'family', 'stock', 'kind', 'strain', 'clan', 'tribe', or 'race', but consequently was also used to designate various kinds of groups, besides Hindu ones, such as the 'caste of Moors', the 'caste of Christians' etcetra. Hence, the much-discussed notion of 'purity of blood' deduced from the etymological derivation of the word from the Latin *castus*, meaning 'chaste' or 'pure', was only one among many distinct meanings. It was only later that the Dutch and then the English employed the term caste as a technical social term, in short as a one-word restricted description of the approximately 3,000 groupings within Hindu society. However, though the term caste had been coined in the initial stages of European contact with India, the fact that in most early reports various other more familiar terms, [that are] more commonly employed in the European context, were preferred, indicates that the distinctive traits perceived in Indian society were being brought in line with apparently similar European social divisions; India was thus being drawn closer to Europe, be it in the latter's own terms, and not being distinguished from it as was to be the case later on. Hence, the coeval nature of India was implicitly acknowledged, a striking contrast, indeed, to more recent Western attitudes.

(Extract from *Hinduism: Self-Perception and Assesment of Tradition* by Gita Dharam pal-Frick)

heredity does vitiate social relations in a serious way. The pressure to marry only within one's *biradari* often takes a deadly form, especially for women who are compelled to live very circumscribed lives so that they don't have much of an opportunity to develop relationships outside those sanctioned by the family.

Class Versus Caste

However, some of these features are present in class and racially divided societies as well. Exploitation is no less brutal in many of the non-caste based societies. In fact, some of them put greater hurdles in the way of upward mobility for individuals than does our caste-based society. Therefore, there is nothing inherently morally superior about class-based societies. If our aim is to make society more egalitarian the so-called class divided societies do not provide an ideal role model. In fact caste identities provide certain advantages to its group members which are not available in what are supposedly class-based societies. That may well be the reason why people cling tenaciously to these identities. Some of these advantages are:

- A relatively more secure social life, even for the poor, and a less hazardous process of upward mobility since it usually comes as part of group mobility. Unlike class based societies which glorify individual initiative for upward mobility and atomise human beings in the process, who owe responsibility to no one but themselves, caste and kinship ties provide a much more effective security net than anything offered by class organisations or the modern state.

- In any crisis, be it a sudden death or any other calamity, closely connected kin from one's own caste are the ones who are supposed to help. Even loans needed to tide over crisis or set up a business often come from within this group. The responsibility for social functions is shared. It is not uncommon for poor members of a *biradari* to get financial help at the time of a daughter's wedding from the better off members. In

most cases, they will ensure a decent cremation and last rites even if a particular member of the *biradari* dies penniless. Even in metropolitan centres like Bombay, *caste/biradari* associations make provision for book banks and scholarships for students from poorer families among other facilities. Setting up of student hostels in towns by well organised caste panchayats played an important role in the spread of higher education among certain rural based groups whose sons could not have made the transition to city education without this support. Establishment of community centres and *baraat ghars* and *dharamshalas* at important pilgrimage centres are among other important social services provided by caste organisations.

- Since most caste groups are not economically homogeneous, it gives the poorer members of that caste group access to economically better off people. As a consequence of *biradari* and caste connections, the rich and poor in India (barring the absolutely marginalised groups and a few at the top who have severed ties with their community in favour of being part of a national or international elite) do not live in mutually exclusive worlds. The case of Lalloo Prasad Yadav, the chief minister of Bihar, one of whose brothers is a peon and the other one an ordinary peasant, is not an exceptional case. Most of the urban upper and middle class are linked through caste/kinship connections to a whole range of people much lower down the economic hierarchy—a bus conductor who can claim a close relationship with a minister or MP, a poor peasant—one of whose nephews becomes a Superintendent of police—are fairly common occurrences in India. The solidarity of the caste group ensures that even the poor can lay some claim to sharing some of the crumbs of power and privilege that certain members of a caste group achieve. Thus caste solidarity becomes an important tool for upward mobility of the entire group, even though

internal differentiation may continue to exist for a while. Even if a few members of a caste group get access to jobs which bring power and influence, it begins to slowly affect the social and economic status of the entire group.

- When people migrate to the cities in search of jobs, it is usually their own *biradari bhais* who give them shelter and other support, including help in finding a job and a house. These caste and kinship connections function much more effectively in helping people find employment than the non-functioning wasteful employment exchanges set up by the government. This support system makes migration of the poor a much less traumatic experience than it would be if they come in as atomised individuals. The efficacy of this system is evident from the fact that it functions amongst Indians even in far off countries such as Canada or Fiji. Even when the poorest of the poor migrate they do so as part of a kinship/caste group and follow others who have preceded them. When they make *jhuggis* as encroachers on public or private land, they do so as a group, almost never individually, for it gives them relatively greater power in resisting demolitions and evictions than if they were unconnected individuals.

- For the poor this solidarity is very important in their dealings with better off and more powerful groups as well as the government machinery. Caste kinship ties spread over neighbouring villages, provide places of shelter and resistance when the lower castes face atrocities at the hands of upper castes. It is a common occurrence that in case any one member of the group is subject to abuse by his/her employer, the whole *biradari* will descend to protest and settle scores.

Police atrocities on the poor would be even more frequent were it not for the fact that in many cases when a slum dweller is arrested on false charges, a large number of his *biradari* people will gather at the police station and protest, with a relatively better chance of being heard than the protest of a lone individual

succeeded in making the colonial view of caste acquire dominance over reality.

The textual view of Indian society put together by Orientalists projected Indian society as static, timeless and spaceless. Arbitrarily selected texts from as early as the 3rd century were used as though they could describe the nature of society and culture in the 18th and 19th century. This picture allowed for no regional variation. It acknowledged no gap between prescriptive, normative statements derived from certain texts and the actual behaviour of individuals or groups. Indian society was seen as obeying a set of fixed rules which every Hindu followed. Texts that did not fit in with the British constructed model were bypassed and even suppressed and certain others systematically built up as the ultimate and final authority in the matter. For example, the *Manusmriti* became the favourite text of the British. Its reprinting was approved by the Governors in London as late as 1815, even when the publication of most other ancient Indian literary and legal texts did not secure their approval.

While the Orientalists in the early 19th and late 18th century presented Brahmins as the source of authority and power, both sacred and temporal, and built a romantic, mythical picture of the hierarchical nature of Indian society, the colonial administrators and missionaries picked up this stereotype view for vigorous attack on the entire social system. They felt that the caste system, the legal system, institutions of governance, and above all, the despotic role of the Brahmins were the cause of the 'degraded' state of the Hindus whose only hope for progress lay in elimination of Hinduism. Here is a typical quote:

"Like all other attempts to cramp the human intellect, and forcibly to restrain men within bounds which nature scorns to keep, this system, however specious in theory, has operated like the Chinese national shoe, it has rendered the whole nation cripples. Under the fatal influence

of this abominable system, the brahmins have sunk into ignorance, without abating an atom of their claims to superiority; the kshatriyas became almost extinct before their country fell into the hands of Muslims; the voishyas are no-where to be found in Bengal; almost all have fallen into the class of shoodras, and shoodras have sunk to the level of their own cattle." (William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos*, London, Kingsbury, Panbury and Alien, 1822, Vol.2, pp. 64,65)

There were occasional voices which tried to contradict this stereotype view - for example H. T. Colebrook, who on the basis of his observations rather than textbook knowledge, wrote in 1806 that "in practice little attention was paid to the limitations" of "hereditary prohibition on undertaking other than one's father's occupation" supposedly imposed by the caste system or the four *varna* theory, "...daily observation shows even Brahmins exercising the menial profession of a Sudra. We are aware that every caste forms itself into clubs or lodges, consisting of the several individuals of that caste residing within a small distance; and that these clubs or lodges, govern themselves by particular rules and custom, or by laws. But, though some restrictions and limitations, not founded on religious prejudice are found among their by-laws, it may be received as a general maxim that the occupation, appointed for each tribe, is entitled merely to a preference. Every profession, with few exceptions, is open to every description of persons; and the discouragement, arising from religious prejudices, is not greater than what exists in Great Britain from the effects of Municipal and corporation laws..." (Henry Thomas Colebrook, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, London, Blacks and Parry, 1806, p.174)

But the dominant view continued to project the caste system as a barbaric and hateful institution - the root of

all evil in Hindu society. It was presented as a rigid and unchangeable hierarchy. Even though in actual practice most *jatis* were horizontally placed with regard to each other, the British were obsessed with grading of groups in a tight hierarchy, assigning high and low status resembling the medieval European theory of the Chain of Being. The venom heaped on the caste system was deliberate and systematic. For the administrators, it was part of an ideological attack to convince the Indians that the British were here on a 'civilising' and 'modernising' mission. The missionaries considered it necessary to destroy what they thought was the social basis of Hinduism. Caste; provided an important obstacle to large scale conversions and made cultural enslavement of Indians a more difficult and slower process. Social ostracism was a powerful weapon in the hands of caste *panchayats* in dealing with the few who accepted Christianity. As long as an individual who converted cut himself/herself off from the rest of society, there was little hope of the spread of Christianity. The severance of *beti roti ka rishta* and right to *hukkapani* among one's kin group was a potent factor in preventing large scale conversions in India, except in tribal areas which were outside the pale of the caste system. Much of the missionary anger against upper castes is related to their inability to find converts among them. They knew that they could not break down Indian society nor ideologically hegemonise it as long as only a few of the marginalised and poorest groups were available to them for conversion.

The colonial administrators hated the caste and other diversities because it made this society harder for them to understand and even harder to govern. For example, the verdict of a caste *panchayat* was commonly more potent than the judgements of the British law courts which could rarely exercise direct hegemonic sway over the vast population. Bernard Cohn's study of a

or family, who in most cases would be too intimidated to protest without the protection that numbers give. Thus groups which have greater caste cohesiveness are relatively less vulnerable to the tyranny of the government machinery.

●The creation of new elites within disadvantaged caste groups should not be dismissed as necessarily socially counter productive. This is often part of the process of democratising society. Groups without an integrally connected elite of their own tend to become far more vulnerable and are more exploited if they cannot claim protection from the elite of their own community. Their own might exploit them, but have to observe some semblance of restraint which an outsider elite, such as the modern IAS or IPS officers, do not have to observe.

●Caste panchayats give even the poor some sense of internal control over their community affairs and opportunity for the exercise of power. Each caste has its own authority figures. An elder who is considered a respected leader of his own caste is likely to be treated with deference by members of a dominant or higher caste. This provides a space for the emergence of political leaders from even poorer castes who are able to mobilize their community for making collective efforts for upgrading their social status.

●Caste associations provide the lower castes an opportunity to achieve, through politics, the social and political power that is inaccessible to them through other social instrumentalities. Modern democracy has strengthened not weakened caste ties because elections provide the occasion for successful organisation of lower castes against the hitherto dominant castes and give them an opportunity to develop their own leaders rather than be dependent for leadership on other dominant groups. For example, the emergence of Scheduled caste leader Kanshi's Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party reduces the dependence of lower caste groups on

upper caste leaders in espousing their cause. Through caste and kinship networks the poor and socially disadvantaged groups are able to mobilise themselves into powerful vote banks. Their numerical strength gives them some bargaining power against politicians who must woo them for votes and in many cases gives a winning chance to their own candidates wherever they are or are able to put together an effective coalition. Due to the interaction of caste and the democratic process, the political leadership even at the national level is forced to make concessions to local aspirations and sentiments and learn to adjust to the claims and counter-claims of various communal groups. This has provided some measure of check against centralised authoritarian polity. For example, the Meham Chaubisi was more successful in challenging the tyranny of the Devi Lal dynasty than most of the modern institutions like the police and judiciary, the Election Commission, or even the national press.

These and many other support mechanisms provided by the kinship and caste networks have ensured their survival through creative adaptation to modern social-political life. It is time we accepted this reality and stopped indulging in pious, radical posturing expecting caste to disappear and give way to a modern society of our fantasies. Only then can we meaningfully deal with combating some of the oppressive aspects of caste, chief among them being claims of notions of hereditary superiority coupled with concentration of economic and political power among certain dominant castes leading to a great deal of local tyranny and brutal abuse, especially when certain caste groups are economically dependent on others. Challenges to the tyrannical aspects are already underway but have had only mixed success despite instances of mobilisation of various lower caste groups challenging the privileged status of upper castes. These movements in many ways further

strengthen caste identities among lower caste groups. Simply because democratisation of power continues to take a casteist route in our society, it need not on that ground be viewed as altogether unprogressive, as long as those organising caste mobilisations are willing to accept the democratic ethos, both for internal functioning as well as for inter-caste relations. Unfortunately, not much attention has been paid to this aspect and caste rivalries often take deadly forms.

Individuals Versus Collectives

Just as the doomsday prophecies of anti reservationists regarding the consequences of the proposed reservations are inappropriate and exaggerated, likewise the claims of proreservationists that this step is a precursor to a great social revolution are also exaggerated. Both pro and anti reservationists have made much fuss over whether or not the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations will bring about social equality — the pro-reservationists insisting that this is a major step towards a great social revolution and those opposing it vehemently asserting that this will only benefit elites of certain caste groups and that benefits won't percolate down to the really poor and downtrodden. Many of them extend the argument to suggest that reservations should be on the basis of economic criteria so that it can benefit the really poor. Those who argue that there is danger of misuse of reservations on the basis of caste, ignore the fact that economic criteria are even more tricky to apply.

In an economy like ours where the majority of people are self-employed and whose wages or incomes do not come into official records, it is impossible to have a reliable measure of family income. With the use of economic criteria as a basis for job reservations, we will only give further encouragement to the industry for the manufacture of false income certificates. Dissimulation about

Rajput dominated village in U. P. points out that up until 1906 not a single case went up to British established courts from that particular taluka, once a final decision had been given by the panchayat of chiefs. (Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Others Essays*, p. 269). All the new fangled laws, including those meant for the 'reform' of Indian society, could be ignored with impunity if caste and *biradari* leaders decided otherwise. The British needed to destroy all rival power centres in order to become effective rulers and impose a new system of centralized governance.

At the same time, the British were great supporters of their version of the caste system, as they saw caste as one of the sociological keys to understanding the Indian people. From the first census onwards, caste became the basis of information collection. Many nationalist leaders were to later allege that this was done with a view to keep alive and exacerbate the numerous divisions already present in Indian Society. The British began by placing castes (*jatis*) in the four *varnas* or in the categories of Outcastes and Aborigines. The next stage was to order the castes on the basis of social precedence.

There were widespread protests from various caste groups regarding their placement in the social hierarchy. Petitions galore were submitted to the government by newly formed caste *sabhas* to claim a status different from the one assigned to them. This resulted in a livening up of the caste spirit. To quote M.N. Srinivas: "...the ranks accorded to castes in census reports became the equivalent of traditional copper-plate grants declaring the status, rank and privileges of a particular caste or castes." (cited in Cohn, op.cit, p. 241) The British even added the notion of racial superiority to explain the hierarchy of castes. Since scholarships to educational institutions and government

jobs were being linked to caste characteristics (for example, the notion of martial castes for recruitment in the army), it set into motion new conflicts between castes while at the same time artificially ossifying caste status though in reality *jatis* were not the static entities they were made out to be. They had a history of undergoing major changes and transformation in status over time and space.

Even though the practice of collecting caste based information was discontinued after 1931, the emergence of new caste based organizations changed the Indian political scene for ever. *Jati* still remained the operational unit for marriage and kinship ties, but political mobilization came to be based on a merger of several similar but dispersed *jatis* in horizontal placement to forge a new common identity over larger geographical territories to form caste based political organizations. Thus, caste associations are a modern creation and have been both the product and agent of fusion of *jatis* within an overarching caste category. In the pursuit of political power, caste associations have spilled over all the earlier restrictive boundaries. For example, the All India Yadav Mahasabha attempts to bring a heterogeneity of *jatis* under one umbrella. The operational units of *jatis* were and continued to be much smaller. The organisation of castes on such a large scale is a post-British phenomenon.

While providing legitimacy to the new caste system that the British helped evolve by their policies of governance, from mid 19th century onwards a very vigorous ideological attack was launched against it by the British. But their hatred towards caste organization was not really based on hatred of power and privilege per se, even though they often used a radical, progressive vocabulary to critique it. Nor was it born of a zeal to make society more egalitarian.

It could not be, because they came to establish the rule of a vastly privileged minority based on notions of racial superiority. (Even with regard to their own society, their notion of governance justified concentration of power and privilege in the hands of a small elite). Writings on the caste system focussed either on the abusive aspects or those aspects of the caste system that did not aid the British in their designs. Their attack was aimed especially at the Brahmins who were projected as the symbol of all that was evil in the caste system. The critique based itself on a caricatured stereotype of a Brahmin - someone arrogant, superstitious and tyrannical - a repository of all the negative qualities. The noteworthy point is that the critique levelled at the Brahmins (claims to special privileges, tyranny based on false notions of superiority) was even more true of the British elite, not just in their role as alien rulers in India, but even as ruling elite within their own country. A society with a long tradition of learning and sense of history, as was India, is much harder to enslave than societies without a literate tradition and written records of its past. To effect that severance with its own past, groups who acted as repositories of learning, art and culture had to be undermined. Thus the English educated groups of Brahmins who became the super elites of Indian society had their cultural social roots severed and all their aspirations directed towards becoming part of a westernised international elite. This group, imbibed the British critique of Indian society lock, stock and barrel and went about heaping contempt on all the surviving traditional institutions much in the same way as did their colonial masters. Secure in their own new found super privileged status, they were extremely resentful of the elites of groups lower down and never tired of projecting those elites as the exploiters of society while projecting themselves as the forces of 'progress and national unity,' just as the British did. □

caste identity is not altogether uncommon. But misrepresentation of income is a much more routine matter. It is harder to detect and involves no stigma. In fact, having a hidden income is considered a status symbol whereas lying about one's caste evokes genuine social disapproval.

There are distinct advantages to using caste criteria. Despite some amount of diversification there is still a good deal of continuing association of caste with certain occupational categories. If one takes into consideration regional specificities/ variations one finds that members of a caste tend to share a common level of opportunities and resources. Thus, it becomes a convenient way of identifying persons with a low level of opportunity and resources as well as taking into account the negative effect of social prejudices in determining lack of access to social opportunities. There is a sufficient affinity of conditions among members of a caste group irrespective of its socio-economic heterogeneity. Since communal membership is more readily ascertainable, there is relatively little slippage in distribution. The benefits do reach the group for whom they are meant, even if not to the poorest among them.

Moreover, the benefits arising from jobs given to even a small number of a particular caste group very soon have a multiplier effect within the whole

community. This would not happen if such benefits are endowed on isolated individuals. Ties of kinship, loyalty and the social pressure for mutual support ensure that many more people are able to derive benefits from one single individual getting a good job. Communal groups have a greater potential capacity for political organisation to counter balance the inefficiency and sluggishness of the administrative machinery in delivering benefits to those for whom they are meant. For every one person who gets a government job from a particular community, dozens of his *jaat bhais* could benefit by way of help in getting jobs, hundreds others will be helped in getting a water connection, a licence, a loan from a bank or help in securing information from a government office which would not come to them otherwise. These individuals also act as important role models for others to emulate thus creating new aspirations within the community. Thus even the process of creation of a job holding elite among disadvantaged groups is a welcome development from the point of view of democratisation of opportunities.

The idea of compensatory discrimination does not altogether detract from the principle of equality as is often argued by anti-reservationists. It is to promote equalisation by offsetting historically accumulated inequalities. To sum up Marc Gallanter:

The poor among upper castes could be viewed as those who have failed to benefit from a favourable heritage and the better off among the deprived castes seen as those who did well despite unfavourable circumstances and heritage. Even the relatively well off individuals within lower castes may be thought of as worse off than they if they had not suffered social disabilities on account of their caste status. (The OBCs suffered not as much due to 'social' disabilities but more due to their being part of a much neglected and exploited rural sector.)

Broadbasing the Elite

Many of the contemporary upper caste groups, both in the North and the South, have since the early 20th century changed the source of their power and privilege from land to acquiring a monopoly over jobs in the bureaucracy and in elite professions. They are known to have held a similar position in pre-British India, enjoying the patronage of various local dynasties, but lost this eminent position temporarily with the coming of British rule which limited avenues of their social advancement till they took to English education. This provided them with many new avenues of upward social mobility. It is noteworthy that one of the earliest demands of the Indian National Congress was that the British reserve for the Indians a reasonable proportion of jobs



in the Indian Civil Service. This elite service in those days allowed entry to very few Indians.

Having cornered most of the elite jobs in urban areas, especially after Independence, the upper castes slowly dispersed far away from their villages. As a result, there has been a relative decline in the power and influence of their caste *panchayats*. At the same time the caste organisations among those termed BCs have acquired a new ferocity and power, especially those that are primarily rural based. With some of the upper caste elite abandoning the villages in favour of urban opportunities the BCs have emerged as the new rural elite. Hence they can easily be targeted for attack as the oppressors of the rural poor.

Till not very long ago the Indian middle class and professionals were recruited almost exclusively from among select urban upper caste groups. With reservation this can no more be the case. The recruiting base of the urban middle class and elite professions will be expanded as 'lower' caste groups acquire positions of power and influence in the bureaucracy. Already we have witnessed the emergence of a very small middle class among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in most parts of the country as well as a larger group among Backward Castes in the South, thanks to the job reservations implemented there for some decades now. A similar development among the OBCs of the North should not be viewed as an unwelcome development. Among other things, it will help bridge the pernicious rural-urban divide in India because most of the OBCs are rural based peasant or artisanal groups. They have taken much longer than their counterparts in the South to get organised politically in such a way as to create pressure from below for demanding a certain share of power and influence. The strong adverse reaction to reservations may in part be due to the fact that being politically well organised, they are actually in a position to effectively challenge the dominance of

the urban upper caste elite and ensure that unlike the SC/ST job quotas, which often lapse for lack of candidates, OBC quotas are actually utilised. Their claims need not be dismissed on account of their 'elite status' vis a vis other rural groups.

Historically, the power of the existing elite has always been challenged by newly-emerging elites of the groups below them, almost never by the absolutely downtrodden. That may explain why the English educated national elite was so fond of *verbally* championing the cause of the poor and landless in rural society. That provided them a moral legitimacy when denying the claims of newly emerging regional elites. The rural destitutes were in no position to challenge the power of the upper caste English educated elite. At the same time they provide them with a good stick to beat the OBCs and other peasant groups who are projected as the rural tyrants who need to be controlled by the upper caste national elite. But the upper caste elite who easily assume the mantle of the defenders of the rights of the rural poor against the land owning peasant groups have a dismal record of concern for the rights of the poor when it comes to their own acts of commission and omission. The upper caste dominated bureaucracy is almost uniformly oppressive, both for the BCs and SCs, and have neglected to provide even basic amenities like water, primary health care and schools for the urban and rural poor. In fact, most of the so-called rural elite share many of the deprivations in common with the rural poor due to the absence of basic amenities in villages.

Why the Battle Around Government Jobs?

The performance of the bureaucracy since Independence is universally acknowledged to be dismal. Unfortunately, despite acute and widespread disgruntlement against the malfunctioning of the government machinery, the band of culprits who occupy positions of power have become

not a despised community but, on the contrary a highly prestigious group. About two thirds of the government's budget is eaten up by the administration. While the capacity of the civil service to do good is limited to itself and hangers on, its potential for harm is unlimited for the citizens as a whole.

If there is such a murderous battle over government jobs, including that of peons and clerks, it is proof that control over this monstrous machinery is in deed a matter of life and death for any group. Whichever groups control the government machinery and can influence the decision making process, including the lower levels, come to be the powerful groups. They acquire an unmatched power to tyrannise people and indulge in self aggrandisement. Groups that do not have access to government jobs remain vulnerable and powerless. If we had a civilised system of administration this would not be the case and being a member of this tyrannical clerkdom would not be such a sought after boon.

No matter what be one's economic status, the key to power in modern day India is the control over the bureaucracy. Even a supposedly powerful chief minister like Karpoori Thakur remained helpless in many ways because he was not able to get the cooperation of the Bihari upper caste dominated bureaucracy due to his own status as a Backward caste leader.

In recent years peasant movements have directed their wrath primarily against an organised bias against rural areas in the terms of trade and against callous neglect of rural areas combined with the tyranny of the bureaucracy. Protest is one response. The other response is a murderous battle over government jobs, including that of peons and clerks. The ferocity of battle is a proof that control over this monstrous machinery is indeed a matter of life and death for any group. Government in India is regarded, not just as another employer, but as one that affords a high degree of control over vital resources, security,



Marks, Merit and Competence

THE whole debate around reservations centred around the fear that if the OBCs are not required to enter into an open competition with other candidates for government jobs, they will get them even though they may have lower marks. It was argued that if these OBCs become engineers and doctors, the bridges they build would supposedly fall down and their patients die due to their incompetence. Some even went to the extent of saying that the “security of state will be threatened” if OBCs are recruited in to key services, especially the defence forces. Did they deliberately forget that all the defence related scandals, illegal kickbacks, purchase of substandard weaponry and rampant corruption have mostly involved the upper castes who dominate the top layers of the defence establishment?

Rajiv Dhawan, in an article in *The Hindu* (Dec. 4-5, 1990) asks: “Can we really measure merit? And, if so, can we do so with discerning precision? Is a candidate with 82.11 percent marks really superior to the one with 82.10 percent? If measurement eludes us, is there any point in placing an incongruous premium on its consequences? The argument that reservations necessarily generate incompetence is neither logical nor fair. There is an important distinction to be

made between *merit* and *competence* (emphasis mine). Reservations may sacrifice merit. But it is no part of any balanced reservations programme to abandon the eligibility requirement of competence as a base line requirement for selection.” Those who harp on the stereotype of incompetent OBC doctors, engineers, civil servants and the like, willfully and maliciously invent a false version of reservations to mobilise bias. It is, and must remain, a requirement of any egalitarian just reservations policy to ensure that requisite levels of competence are scrupulously met.

Incompetence is indeed too high a price for a society to pay to bring about social justice. But competence and social justice need not be mutually exclusive. “Compensatory discrimination allows preferences where people fall within a zone of consideration.” That is, even if they may not appear at the top of the merit list, the candidates concerned should be expected to have an adequate level of competence for that particular job. For reservations compensate social disadvantage. “It is not a charity being doled out to the hopelessly unable”. Contrary to popular prejudice that those who get in through the reserved quota are hopelessly incompetent, the experience in the Southern states, where

reservations have been implemented for decades now, shows that the gap between the cut off points of the general, OBC and SC/ST groups is narrowing. In fact, reservations, by providing strong motivations, seem to have stimulated the spirit of competition and spurred the BC-SC/ST students to perform better, as is demonstrated by the table prepared by Era Chezhiyan and published in *The Hindu* of October, 1990. Thus for example, in the MBBS course, the cut off point for open competition was 95.22%. It was 93.18% for Backwards, 89.62% for the Most Backward, and 83.98% for SCs. In using the above example, one is not attempting to strengthen the common understanding that marks obtained in examinations, either solely or even primarily, measure merit or even competence. In fact, the reliance on using the marks obtained criteria in admissions or jobs is more for the purpose of weeding out rather than selecting, thereby reducing the number of candidates from amongst whom final choice is to be made. It is important to keep in mind that most employers or institutions today carry their own selection tests rather than depend upon marks obtained in examinations. Thus marks obtained may be a worthwhile *initial* screening criteria, but should not

prestige and authority, not obtainable elsewhere. Therefore, it is the prime focus of ambition for the educated. In the 40 years since Independence, people have despaired of India keeping its tryst with destiny in an upsurge of collective achievement. It's each one for himself and devil take the hindmost. Since its much harder to fend for oneself individually, people stick to their caste / community identity more ferociously than would be required if our system of administration was more responsive and civilised. Having a few relatives or kin in the government assures accessibility and a sympathetic response to one's interests. Access to government jobs is crucial for advancement, especially for the newly educated groups who have not diversified their educational skills sufficiently for them to enter other well-paying professions and private sector jobs.

This in part explains why the lower middle class students from non elite institutions joined the anti reservation movement with such ferocity, why they felt desperate that the new reservations would completely ruin their life chances. For those among upper castes who are unable to have access to elite English medium schools, the only hope of a secure future is to get a class III or class IV government job. For it requires very little talent or skill, and assures a middle class salary with the guarantee of lifetime security involving very little work and even less accountability. In addition, a number of government jobs fetch a lot of bribes. They provide one an opportunity for reciprocal obligation so that one's area of influence extends far beyond one's own job. The poorly educated lower middle class youth are unable to enter the much more competitive and insecure private sector. Therefore, access to government jobs becomes a life and death issue for those who have few other avenues of social advancement open to them, especially those for whom *sifarish* is the chief mode of getting a job— something that works

more easily in government jobs than in the private sector. If we had a functioning educational system and a more accountable system of administration, accountable in accordance with predetermined parameters which recognise legitimate interests, not of this or that powerful lobby but of the people as a whole, being a member of the inefficient and tyrannical clerkdom would not be such a sought after boon. Unless we move determinedly in that direction, the ferocious battles over government jobs will continue and assume the dimensions of a virtual civil war.

Job reservation for OBCs might bring about a certain redistribution of power and patronage and democratise corruption, but it will not in itself bring about an efficient and egalitarian social order. It is no doubt important to see that government jobs are not monopolised by certain groups. But equally important is to ensure that the government machinery becomes more accountable to the people. If those in government jobs are actually made to work in a way that people can demand service of them (as against the present mode of having to grovel before them), and dismiss them if they do not perform well, it is unlikely that there will be such a scramble for government jobs.

Let me illustrate this through an example. Among the most sought after jobs is that of a policeman - not just at the IPS level but even more so at the lower levels of a constable or sub-inspector. The working conditions of policemen at the lower levels are poor and hazardous. Their duty hours are long and unpredictable. They are constantly subjected to scoldings and humiliation by their senior officers. Policemen are viewed with fear and suspicion by most people and thus lack social respect. Yet many a family would pay any price to get a son in the police force.

Firstly, there is the lure of large amounts of bribes that are expected to come with a police job. SHOs of

important *thanas* are known to make several lakhs of 'extra income' every year and are known to 'buy' these postings. But no less important than this bribe money is the power to harass and intimidate that a policeman acquires. In many instances, policemen virtually get away with murder, as long as they please their bosses, who themselves are often involved in similar abuse of power. A citizen has no real redress possible unless he or she can put pressure on a more senior officer. In addition, a policeman, including an ordinary sub-inspector, has tremendous power of patronage, the ability to get work done from other government departments.

But most important of all, a policeman can avoid doing the work he is primarily meant for—namely crime control. Barring a few exceptions, policemen are among the chief patrons of crime and collect regular pay offs from all kinds of criminals.

The possession of so much arbitrary power in the hands of a policeman makes his job a sought after privilege. Compare it with an ordinary *chowkidar*, the kind that every colony or *mohalla* association appoints on their own guard their neighbourhoods. This *chowkidar* does a part of the job that the police should actually be doing, but not often do—keep vigil in order I protect a neighbourhood from thieves and criminals. The *mohalla* appointed *chowkidar* has to take his rounds at night and dare not sleep during his duty hours. If residents find him cheating his job, he is fired immediately. If there are any thefts in the neighbourhood he will likewise find his job in danger. Even a hint of suspicion about his complicity with thieves and he faces immediate dismissal.

No wonder that the job of a *mohalla chowkidar* is not at all sought after as is the job of a policeman, even though the former's 'salary' may be as much as the policeman's. Linked to this is the question, how is it that any neighbourhood association can exercise

be seen as the final validation of merit/competence.

It is neither being demanded nor required that incompetent people be recruited for jobs simply because they carry a certain caste certificate. In fact, the more enduring problem lies precisely in the inability of the present job controlling elite to enforce even minimum levels of competence and efficiency standards in educational institutions and the running of the government machinery, even when they themselves dominate it.

From about 1920, when Indians began to replace the British, we have had certain upper caste groups increasingly monopolising jobs in the government, in the universities, in medical institutions, in the legal profession and everywhere else. Not even the most ardent apologists of the status quo dare assert that the administrative machinery and other government controlled institutions have functioned well. Their functioning is unanimously considered as intolerably inefficient and corrupt. The bureaucracy seems to respond only when approached through *sifarish* (siring pulling) or with bribes. Be it the poor or rich, upper caste or low caste, these are the only two available routes for getting even the most simple work done through the government machinery. So hopelessly rotten is the system of administration that it does not function efficiently even for the elite groups, leave alone the poor. Even the privileged, whether they need a water or an electricity connection, a trading or a driving licence, a cooking gas cylinder or a phone connection, a transporter an industrial permit are faced with only two options—grease the palms of a government functionary or get a higher-up to put in a strong word of *sifarish* and the work gets done. Those unlucky enough not to have the money or the right connections just wait and wait and give up. Virtually nothing comes via standard public procedures or as a right

The system is deliberately designed in a way that only a kick from above

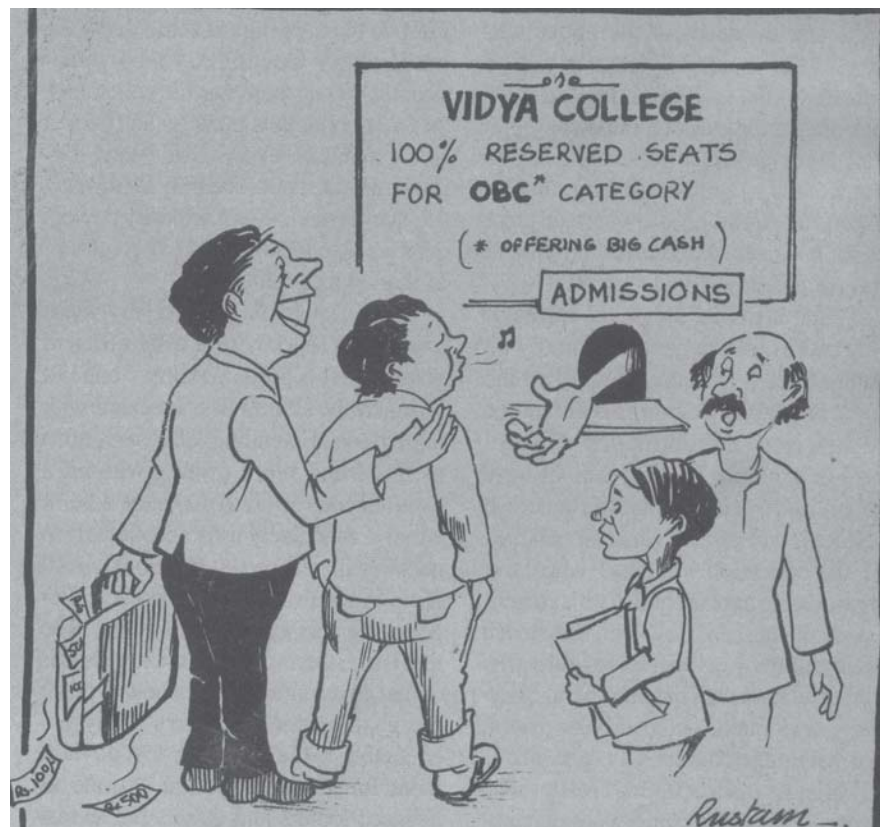
makes the machinery move. Those who don't have the power to get help via intervention from above have to grovel and humiliate themselves and are compelled to offer bribes to government officials to get their work done.

Anti-reservationists have indulged in much tear shedding over the woes of all those who will have to be treated by all those doctors who don't possess requisite 'merit' and will therefore pose a grave risk to the lives of their patients. With all the upper caste domination of the medical profession, we have one of the poorest health delivery systems resulting in one of the highest infant mortality and maternal mortality rates in the world. Even the most elementary health care is not available to the vast majority of India's people, especially in rural areas more than four decades after Independence. Even where trained doctors with fancy degrees are available, many function as licensed killers, for there is no system of accountability in the medical profession. They may kill

you in a combination of different ways—including neglect, wrong medication and badly performed surgery. Yet, there is virtually no redress possible.

Every one of us is familiar with nightmarish stories of the brutality of the medical profession. Most hospitals are so filthy and unhygienic that even a healthy person is likely to come back sick with infections from a few days of stay there. The use of substandard medicines, wrong medication, unsterilised instruments, are all routine affairs. This despite the fact that the medical professions, like most other money making elite professions, is dominated by the upper castes.

The great believers in meritocracy have never protested against the mushrooming of capitation fee colleges which routinely give admissions to the children of the rich who perform poorly in exams. Why are they not afraid of being doctors who get into medical colleges not on the basis of their marks but the hefty donations their parents



such effective control over their *chowkidar* but not over the local policeman — though the job of the two is very similar.

The difference is obvious: the community has the right to hire and fire the *chowkidar* (each household pays Rs. 10 or more towards his salary and thereby everyone acquires the right to check him if found negligent), whereas the policeman is appointed by a very distant and inaccessible authority whom they cannot call to account. His job is guaranteed for life and salary ensured as long as he does not annoy some higher official. Even in cases where local residents have protested vigorously over long periods of time against particular misdeeds of the police station — for example, death in police custody—the maximum that may result after a long drawn out struggle is that one or two of the policemen may be transferred to another posting, that is, allowed to run amok elsewhere. In most cases he is reinstated after the protest has calmed down.

What is true of the police is true of the entire government machinery in India. Its lack of accountability on the basis of established norms is the source of its tyranny and corruption.

For example, if every school were supervised by a committee of concerned residents and parents (instead of *babus* of the education ministry) who have the power to appoint and dismiss teachers on the basis of how well they teach their children, we will have more efficient teachers than the ones being presently appointed, ostensibly on merit, but without accountability to teach.

In most cases it doesn't matter who occupies a certain chair, what percentage of marks he or she got, whether the person is 'Forward' or 'Backward' — anyone who gets to acquire so much power without accountability will become inefficient, and tyrannically so, in many cases even deliberately so, because inefficiency of the government machinery invites bribes. Someone

desperate to get a water connection will be compelled to pay a bribe if the files refuse to move without greasing palms.

The colonial rulers, who built this over centralised and authoritarian administrative machinery, like the present English educated elite, built a whole myth of efficiency around their administration. We were taught to believe that the ICS and other elite services had to be their preserve because Indians lacked the requisite talent and efficiency. We know from experience that they were indeed very efficient and talented in their techniques of exploitation and left this country's people impoverished and ravaged from their rule. Those who inherited power from the British have followed a similar pattern of 'efficiency'. Despite the trappings of democracy, the bureaucracy continues to be unaccountable even more than the politicians. At least politicians must go and seek a fresh mandate every five years; bureaucrats need not. The only legitimacy they have for their vast arbitrary powers is the need to secure a certain percentage of marks in certain exams.

One can go on multiplying these examples. The key to a truly efficient government is accountability—and not so much the skill to pass an exam with high marks. Extending job reservations to more and more groups without a simultaneous effort to make the administrative machinery truly accountable to people will only permit additional social elites to acquire a vested interest in perpetuating this tyrannical system. The real issue, therefore is not who gets this or that government job, but how to make the government machinery really accountable to the people so that government functionaries do not operate as licensed looters and tyrants but as real servants of the people (as opposed to government servants).

Real accountability will be possible only with decentralisation of power—with effective control over the administrative machinery by the local

community including the power to hire and fire.

Flaws in the Mandal Recommendations

The ferocity of the anti-reservation movement and the blatantly elitist bias it displayed polarised the discussion with battle lines sharply drawn. One had to be either totally pro-Mandal or rabidly anti-Mandal. The political context of the announcement of the reservation policy only aggravated the polarisation. The pro-reservationists were unwilling to acknowledge the serious shortcomings in the new reservation policy using the pretext that; any such discussion would only add grist to the mill of anti-reservationists. On the side of anti-reservationists hysterical abuses became the standard way of expressing one's opposition. Even ordinary, mild-mannered students indulged in plain abuse and threats like "Let any *churha* dare speak; in favour of reservations and I will break his head". Thus on both sides vituperation came to substitute dialogue with neither side willing to work; out a settlement.

Among the serious flaws in the Mandal Commission recommendations are: 1) It builds a case for the OBC reservations by citing social disabilities suffered mainly by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Among many others, the famous Eklavya story is used to make the point about hurdles placed by the upper castes in the way of lower castes acquiring learning and knowledge. But Ekalavya wouldn't qualify in the OBC category. He was a member of the, Bhil tribe.

Only one instance is cited—that too not from history but from the epic *Ramayan*— the killing of Shambhukal the hands of Ram as a punishment against a Sudra daring to perform *tapasya*. But the Commission omits to mention that such exclusive claims to knowledge and rituals status by the twice born castes were powerfully challenged by the bhakti movements in different regions of India which gave

give to the college to purchase a seat for their sons?

There is very little merit evident in the way our educational institutions function from the school to the university level. Barring a few elite institutions, most of our schools are not even imparting basic reading and writing skills to the students. This is true not only of our rural schools, about whom the less said the better, but even urban schools run in metropolitan cities.

The following report reveals the real state of affairs in a majority of schools, especially those in rural areas.

"All the 74 students of class X of the government school in Channa village of Sangrur district failed in the matriculation exams held in March 1990". The reason? Just a fortnight before the exams the Punjab militants placed an announcement in the local newspapers banning cheating on exams and threatened "dire consequences" to those who violated their order. In nearby Bhalwan village only 2 percent of the students cleared the exam. It was not very different in other schools of the districts. One of the teachers explained the high failure rate thus: "Students were previously promoted up to class 10 as a matter of course. All one needed was a *sifarish*. Only in class 10 do they face Board exams. There was rampant copying here as well." As the militants forbade cheating, the students failed en masse (*Sunday Observer* Dec. 30, 1990, p. 12).

Year after year as a college teacher have had to deal with students the majority of whom cannot write ten correct sentences in any language, including their mother tongue. In three years of college we compound the damage already done to them after 12 years of similar schooling. I have as little accountability as a teacher as the doctors who have the licence to kill without suffering any consequences. Our universities are mass producing degree holding semiliterates. The teachers, educationists and bureaucrats responsible for this continuing crime



against students are mostly upper-caste 'merit-wallas'.

The press tried to systematically romanticise the participation of students in the antireservation movement as proof of their idealism in wanting to restore the primacy of merit in academic institutions and in the job market. As a teacher I fervently wish this was true. There have hardly been any serious attempts by the students in India to protest against the absurd and irrelevant curriculum, poor quality teaching or inadequate library and related facilities. Students unions have so far confined themselves to protesting against bus fare hikes, fees enhancement, admission quotas, removal of this or that principal or vice-chancellor, and indulged in gang warfare on behalf of various political parties.

Among the teachers the situation is even more dismal. The teacher's unions have almost never taken up the issue of improving teaching standards.

They have focused exclusively on their economic demands—hikes in pay and allowances, increase in medical

benefits, housing and car loans etcetra.

A large number of Delhi teachers who went on strike three times in the last eight years to oppose, among other things, the introduction of the principle of 'merit' in their promotion scheme, suddenly become champions of meritworthiness for jobs. Those who talk of merit in obtaining jobs or education are deliberately overlooking the fact that in our present education system, merit is judged by the percentage one secures in exams, which requires no more than the ability to memorise and reproduce answers to five questions from among one dozen one has mugged from guidebooks or class notes.

The hollowness of the argument about primacy of merit comes out clearly if one considers that as far as the English educated elite are concerned, almost 100 percent of them manage to get admitted to the best of institutions for their education and almost none among them ever remain unemployed. The curriculae are set to their convenience. In

birth to many *important sants* from lower caste groups. Nanak, Kabir, Raidas, Tukaram, among many others were successful in changing the nature of religious discourse in an enduring way.

The Hinduism being practised today by ordinary people is far more influenced by the *bhakti* tradition (despite the BJP-RSS-VHP attempts to destroy this legacy) than by the code of Manu or Vedic Puranic texts. But the Commission relies unnecessarily to build its case for reservations on the supposed low status prescribed in ancient texts to Sudra castes, even though these texts have no prescriptive value today. In reality, many of those designated as Sudras were politically dominant groups in different regions in pre-British India, just as today they have become strong enough to challenge the power of the national elite.

Krishna, whose pronouncements on caste are cited from the *Mahabharat*, was himself a Yadav. The report admits that he “linked an individual’s caste to his *karma* instead of the accident of birth” (“the four-fold order was created by Me on the basis of quality and action”) Statements like: “A Brahmin is one who has the qualities of truthfulness, generosity, sympathy, a dislike for cruelty and a capacity to do *tapas*. This is a Brahmin and no one else”; “a Kshatriya is one who protects the weak and oppressed”, abound in the *Mahabharat*.

In short, even as far as ancient texts are concerned, there is a vast diversity of opinion and interpretation on the subject Quotes can be selectively strung together to prove almost anything. Therefore, it is more appropriate to base our contemporary politics on the realities operating at the ground level today rather than a poorly understood past.

Given that most OBCs are drawn from peasant and artisanal castes, some of whom, despite their poor economic status, are the currently dominant social groups in the villages, the deprivation they suffer in terms of access to education, and jobs is not as much due

to social disabilities as the systematic exploitation of the rural sector and the failure to reach basic amenities to the villages. This is borne out by one, and perhaps the only, concrete example cited in the Mandal report from contemporary Life to show the disabilities suffered by OBCs.

The report argues that it is unfair to compare the performance of a boy who comes from a well-to-do, urban educated family with easy access to books and other modern sources of information with that of a village boy whose backward class parents occupy a low social position in the village hierarchy. But then, when referring to the disabilities suffered by such a boy, there is very little mention of social, caste based persecution. I quote from the report : “His father owns a 4-acre plot of agricultural land. Both his parents are illiterate and his family of 8 lives huddled in a two-room hut. Whereas a primary school is located in his village, for his high school he had to walk a distance of nearly three kilometres both ways. Keen on pursuing higher studies, he persuaded his parents to send him to an uncle at the Tehsil headquarters. He never received any guidance regarding the course of studies to be followed or the career to be chosen. Most of his friends did not study beyond middle school level. He was never exposed to any stimulating cultural environment and he completed his college education without much encouragement from any quarter. Owing to his rural background, he has a rustic appearance. Despite his college education, his pronunciation is poor, his manner awkward and he lacks self-confidence.” Assuming that a boy from an educated middle-class family and this village boy “had the same level of intelligence at the time of their birth, it is obvious that owing to vast differences in social, cultural and environmental factors, the former will beat the latter by lengths in any competitive field.” Even if the village boy is brighter “the chances are that [he] will lag behind” the other

boy “in any competition where the selection is made on the basis of merit”. It is noteworthy that in this entire narrative there is no mention of upper caste persecution and prejudice of the kind that is a reality for many of the Scheduled Castes even today, but does not apply to most OBCs.

2) The disabilities suffered by the OBCs are primarily due to the bias in the modern education system and skewed economic structures. In our economic system the job market or the opportunities for self-employment do not build on or utilise the enormous reservoir of skills and knowledge systems acquired by these groups over centuries. It puts a premium on mindless acquisition of mostly outdated, irrelevant information acquired in English and systematically downgrades and excludes those who don’t have access to this deadening form of exam oriented knowledge. The Mandal report has no answer to this more basic problem.

3) Devising a reservation policy with out simultaneously working out far reaching institutional reforms in the machinery of governance as the Mandal Commission does, will have several negative social consequences including for the OBCs whom it seeks to empower. It will make corruption and nepotism even more widespread because those among the OBCs who make it to the citadels of power, become beneficiaries of the system of non-accountability and thereby acquire a vested interest in perpetuating this tyrannical machinery. The most talented and ambitious among the Backward Castes will thus be sucked into the system as petty tyrants and corrupt officials and lose the ability to be of help to their own community.

4) The Mandal Commission used fairly comprehensive social, educational and economic criteria for assessment of backwardness. But data was treated on the basis of caste divisions. An objective treatment of the information would have revealed clusters of backwardness correlated to other

fact, anyone who is fluent in English and can speak it with the right accent, almost always manages to secure jobs in the well paying elite professions. Even the most lazy, incompetent person coming from a family with connections and access to elite English medium schools and colleges will never be found employed in a class III or class IV job as a peon or clerk. In contrast a person who has not had the opportunity to gain fluency in English and is a first generation educated person lacking 'proper connections' will almost never gain access to elite professions no matter how diligent or bright she or he may be, no matter what the percentage of marks secured by him/her.

One of the key arguments of anti-reservationists was that disaster would strike society if certain number of jobs went to OBCs. The term 'Backward' came to be used as a pejorative and was repeatedly applied in such a way, projecting them as belonging to a lesser species out to invade the sacred domains of privilege enjoyed by upper caste meritocrats. Comments such as: "Arre, did you come through the Backward quota" anytime someone behaved stupidly, are common place even among the supposedly liberal. The term 'Backward Castes' became synonymous with being unintelligent and incompetent, as though these were integral traits of all the castes on the Mandal list of beneficiaries. Even a cursory glance at the criteria used by the Mandal Commission to identify these castes points to a picture of systematic deprivation of certain groups - such as low household income, lack of adequate housing, being distant from basic facilities like sources of safe drinking water or schools rather than low calibre. (The listing undoubtedly has flaws and other criteria could have been explored to identify the deprived sections. But one cannot deny a certain relevance to these criteria.)

The OBCs are no mentally retarded species. They are a conglomeration of peasant and artisan groups, those who

Criteria Used by the Commission

The following are the criteria adopted by the Second Backward Classes Commission in its socio-educational field-survey

A. Social

1. Castes/classes considered as socially backward by others
2. Caste/classes which mainly depend on manual labour for their livelihood.
3. Castes/classes where at least 25% females and 10% males above the state average get married at an age below 17 years in rural areas and at least 10% females and 5% males do so in urban areas.
4. Castes/classes where participation of females in work is at least 25% above the state average.

B. Educational

5. Castes/classes where the number of children in the age group of 5-15 years who never attended school is at least 25% above the state average
6. Castes/classes where the rate of student drop-outs in the age-group of 5-15 years is at least 25% above the state average
7. Castes/classes amongst whom the proportion of matriculates is at least 25% below the state average

C. Economic

8. Castes/classes where the value of family assets is at least 25% below the state average
9. Castes/classes where the number of families living in *kuchha* houses is at least 25% below the state average.
10. Castes/classes where the source of drinking water is beyond half a kilometer for more than 50% of the households
11. Castes/classes where the number of households having taken consumption loan is at least 25% above the state average

| | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------------|---|------|---|-----------|
| Weightage | Social indicators: | 3 | (x4) | = | 12 |
| | Educational indicators | 2 | (x3) | = | 6 |
| | Economic indicators | 1 | (x4) | = | 4 |
| | TOTAL | | | | 22 |

All the castes/classes which had a score of 50% (11 points) or above are treated as Socially and Educationally Backward Classes

for centuries have been the prime generators of social wealth by their hard labour and mastery of certain skills. They came to be especially depressed and deprived with the onset of British rule which systematically exploited the peasantry and destroyed a great deal of industry and craft. In addition, with the introduction of English education, which became the most important passport to privilege and power, they began to be considered illiterate and stupid. The word '*dehati*' when used by the urban educated elite is seldom used as a descriptive term to refer to those who live in '*dehat*' (village). It is mostly used as a pejorative implying someone uncouth and ignorant - no matter how superb their mastery of skills over highly specialized areas of knowledge and craft.

Kancha Ilaiah, in a very moving article narrating his own life experience as a BC explodes brilliantly many of the myths that surround the debate on competency and merit (See other excerpts from his EPW article in this issue).

"...When I talk about our illiterate

parents I am not even for a moment suggesting that they were unskilled people....For example, my mother was an expert wool-thread maker, she was an expert seedler, she was an expert planter. My father was an expert sheep breeder. Each caste group acquired lot of skills in its own sphere...Many of our farmers have scientific skills. They know when it will rain. They can tell us what natural signals would bring forth certain climatic changes. They know where a bridge should be built... If a person who comes from these peasant families with some basic training to organise and hypothesise things he would definitely make a more useful engineer in the agrarian sector than a boy who has spent his time in urban centres. Does it really matter whether the peasant's son got relatively lower marks if he fulfills the basic requirement?" The real tragedy of the new fangled urban educated professionals in this country is that they are alienated from people's needs, people's knowledge and their environment. And through the system

considerations, for example, women, peasantry in arid regions, families with low per capita land holdings, artisans particularly adversely affected since colonial days. Neither Article 15(4) of the Constitution nor the mandate of the Commission imposed the obligation to treat caste as units for assessment of backwardness, but the Commission had a clear ideological bias which preempted it exploring other routes.

5) While reservations for Scheduled Castes and Tribes is an easier affair because there is a greater affinity of life conditions among members of Scheduled Castes, the same cannot be as easily assumed for other castes, including those termed as OBCs. They are far less homogeneous as a group and vast variations exist in the life conditions of castes with the same nomenclature across regions, sometimes even within the same state. Therefore, some blatant absurdities have cropped up in the way the Mandal Commission drew up its list of beneficiary castes. For example, Yadavs in North India, or Malis in Maharashtra have already a good proportion of members doing well in all fields, economic, social, educational and political. Even more absurd is the inclusion of all Bengalis in Madhya Pradesh as OBCs. Likewise all Marwaris in Tamil Nadu and Bengali Kayasthas in Assam are termed Backward by it.

6) While the creation of a caste based elite has some potential of benefiting other members of the same caste group, the Mandal Commission recommendations do not take into consideration the vast enormity of differentiation between and within various castes to be benefited as OBCs. Unless remedial measures are worked out carefully, it is likely that the benefits will be cornered by the economically and politically more powerful among the OBCs, for example, upper layers of Yadavs and Ahirs, at the cost of poorer and less organised caste groups who will not even have the benefit of downward percolation effect.

7) The most serious flaw in the currently proposed reservation scheme is that there is no exit principle inbuilt into the scheme. There are no review procedures for determining at what point a caste group must move out of the reservation scheme and how the progress of beneficiaries will be monitored. This despite the experience of states like Karnataka and Andhra where OBC reservations have brought new elite groups into dominance who refuse to give way to others. For example, the Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka have consolidated their hold over the political and administrative machinery in a big way and have successfully resisted all attempts to take them off the reservation list and include the groups lower down the economic and caste hierarchy. Since they are the ruling elite at the state level, wresting these concessions out of their hands is proving to be as difficult as it is from the traditional upper caste elite in the North. Had this exit principle been carefully worked out, the opposition to reservations in the North may have been less hysterical.

8) The Mandal report is curiously silent on how the benefits of reservations are to be reached to women of the OBCs. In any disadvantaged group, women are among the most oppressed. The hurdles that operate against the social advancement for OBC men are likely to be far more intense in the case of OBC women. For example, the literacy rate among OBC women is far lower than among OBC men.

Moreover, the culture of most North Indian OBC groups is far more oppressive for women than among their southern counterparts. Among the dominant peasant groups of North India, women are compelled to live under crippling restrictions on their mobility and social interactions and kept in *virtual purdah* among many castes. As things stand there are deep prejudices against women's education and employment

within these communities. The literacy rate among OBC women is much lower than among OBC men and this gap is growing. These castes systematically exclude women from all decision making processes. For example, women are not allowed to be even present in the caste panchayats, leave alone take part in the deliberations.

This bias of viewing the culture of restrictions as a proof of high social status comes through even in the Mandal Commission Report. A high rate of women's labour participation is used as evidence of social backwardness of any group. Thus, the ability to withdraw women from labour outside the home compound and making them housebound is seen as a positive indicator of a community's well-being. Given that women have to bear the brunt of drudgery with the dual burden of house-work and field labour, it is likely that many women themselves may view their withdrawal from labour outside the house as a welcome relief.

However, the Commission has not paid attention to the fact that this withdrawal will result in a life of much greater demeaning dependence for women and has not acknowledged the need to redress the social, economic and political power imbalance between OBC men and women.

Women are the real dalits among these castes and have not benefited from the clout these castes have acquired through their political mobilisation because they are disallowed any role in the social, political arena. Therefore, reaching these benefits to women is crucially important as it will help to democratise the internal functioning of caste organisations and encourage women's participation in it.

For OBC reservations to be meaningful, there should be a 50 percent quota for OBC women at all levels. Otherwise women's status within these communities will be further downgraded as their men become increasingly powerful.

of education that they devised to suit their needs and imposed on others, they systematically destroyed much of the valuable skills and knowledge possessed by groups which were unable to acquire 'modern' English education.

Ilaiah gives an example: "... till 1920 in districts like Nizamabad and Karimnagar, wootz steel was being manufactured out of iron ore available in that region. The steel that was being made there was being exported to Persia only to be converted into beautiful swords to be sold in the entire European market.... Who after all were these steelmakers? They hailed from a caste called 'yanadees'... they had developed a remarkable knowledge of the metal ores available in these areas as well as of the physical and geological characteristics of the region. They had developed crucibles of such shape and quality that they could withstand the 1000°C heat required for smelting the steel for 24 hours. Several extremely sophisticated engineering calculations had gone in to converting the clay into a crucible wall. A lot of skills had gone into preparing the charcoal and the furnaces in order to heat the ore-stones and separate the steel from the ore. Yet all these people were called 'yanadees'" (ignorant people). Without a doubt the children of these people would make much better engineers and technologists if allowed the opportunity to enter I.I.Ts and engineering colleges. But the way our curriculum is devised, none of these children will ever qualify using the 'merit' criteria. And most of them are likely to be pushed towards menial, unskilled

occupations, as is happening with a whole range of peasant and artisan groups with the decline of rural industry and economy, and condemned to live as the 'backwards' of our society.

It is no coincidence that the upper caste elite who are deadly opposed to reservations are as threatened by moves to use the regional languages as the language of administration in place of English. For example, the reaction against Mulayam Singh Yadav's move to introduce Hindi as the language of administration in UP, replacing English, was as hostile and virulent as it was to the Mandal Commission Recommendations. Much of the supposedly superior merit flaunted by the national elite would disappear into thin air the day knowledge of English ceased to be the unailing passport to exclusive power and privilege. When they have to begin operating in a language that even ordinary people can understand and use with ease, the gaps will narrow down easily, as has been happening in the Southern states. And if we go further and reform the curriculum in a way that knowledge and skills actually required for the efficient functioning of our economy, polity and civic life are being generated and updated in our schools and universities, those who are condemned as backward today may even acquire distinct advantage over some others.

If we had built an education system based on the upgradation of local skills of the peasant and artisanal groups in our society, children of ironsmiths,

weavers and peasants would by a gradual transition have gone on to become much better metallurgists and textile engineers and botanists. They would not then have been compelled to work as rickshaw-pullers and domestic servants in urban centres after the systematic distraction of rural crafts and industry, and then thrown a few grudging crumbs. The negative aspects of the caste system could have been more effectively countered if the principle of hereditary division of labour had been taken to its logical conclusion and seats in engineering science and technology institutions were reserved for the children of artisans, and in medical institutions for traditional *voids*, *dais* and *hakims*. They would have advantages in certain areas over those from upper castes who have no other skills except book learning. Instead, we are directing too many people's aspirations into becoming inefficient peons, clerks and petty bureaucrats, jobs which are parasitic for the entire society and encourage petty tyranny.

Taking into account caste based social division of labour would in fact destroy the pernicious aspects of the caste system sooner than all the laws and constitutional provisions banning discrimination on the basis of caste. It would also have improved the quality of skills in all concerned professions. If entry into modern elite professions could not be the monopoly of the upper caste English educated elite, they would lose their pre-eminent position very soon.



New Symbols of Hope

Even granting that many of the OBCs and SCs who get educated tend to distance themselves from their community, many among them retain their links and become important vehicles for the emergence of new aspirations and hopes as exemplified in these excerpts from an account by Kancha Ilaiah.

“I AM one of those who became a lecturer in political science under the BC reserved quota in Osmania University. Given the unwritten laws of patronage and access that determine who gets jobs in our institutions, my first class MA, subsequent M Phil and several publications in all-India journals would not have brought me a job but for the reservation. In my university out of 1,200 teachers, about 160 became teachers only because of reservations to OBCs, SCs and STs....”

“Seats through reservations in the colleges and universities to majority of the sudra youth who did not have education for centuries, whose parents were illiterate, to whom books were never known at home, definitely opened up a new world.... The renaissance of the rural masses-the SC, ST and Backward Classes in a way began with the implementation of reservations (which began in 1967 in Andhra Pradesh). Many of my friends managed to get into university after having gone through school, living in social welfare hostels. For them it was the beginning of a new hope, a new life. In spite of the fact that poverty was haunting them there was the hope that they would get a job soon....”

Describing the impact of the availability of education on the village life he says: “Our parents kept talking about the children who were studying in the state capital. Those who got into medical or engineering courses became an important topic of discussion at the time when people came together at festivals or marriages. Every poor BC, SC and ST mother was dreaming of educating her growing child. She hoped they would become like those of us who were then studying in the big cities....”

“As a first student who entered the degree college from my village (my village consisted entirely of sudras except for two families of banyas who were petty traders) I know what a telling impact it

had on the entire village; so many people celebrated my joining the college! Almost in every second family, wife and husband, had heated debates about sending their children to school and college as my mother had.

“But it was not only the village that changed. I did not remain what I was after joining the degree course. I opted for English as one of my subjects...., and began to develop hopes that I should make it into the IAS. For that there were two reasons. One was that an SC person (Madhava Rao) was our district collector. He was said to have been helping the SCs and BCs a lot at that time. As the collector’s residence and office were adjacent to my degree college I would see the queues of SCs and BCs in front of Madhava Rao’s residence every day. Second, one of my teachers was not only an admirer of Madhava Rao but, was also trying to encourage us to emulate the Collector and help the people....”

“...On Sundays when I was in the village I conducted classes for my illiterate and semiliterate village friends in the tea shops and at my residence, telling them about the changes that were coming in the Soviet Union and China. I still remember that when we conducted a class in the village school on the changes in Europe and India many illiterate village elders, their sons, peasants, even some schoolchildren belonging to all castes attended it. After the talk was over, I remember how many peasants belonging to Backward Classes and SCs told me that they were determined to send their children to school. Thus education becomes a dream for them. This dream begins because here is a person who came from their neighboring family, who bears their name and has now become knowledgeable. They feel that it is not impossible to see their own child also becoming knowledgeable like this person. With the reservations higher education was

brought down to the SC, ST and BC Wadas. This was like Hegel bringing god from heaven to earth. Education earlier, in almost all the villages had been restricted to the Brahmins, Banyas and landlords and these people were distinct from the rest. Their children had no interaction with the working class masses....”

“...After I was educated and employed, the attempts of several families from my village to send their children gained momentum. It is as a result of such attempts that a boy called Sambaiah became an engineer getting a seat in BE in the reserved quota. He did extremely well in studies. Some SC and BC boys completed their inter and degree courses and found jobs. One BC boy became a teacher, Two Kapu boys completed their PC courses and subsequently one is engaged in research. The fact remains that now the whole village looks at education as one of the vehicles for social change....¹

“...For those who have been educated for generations, a college seat does not mean social change, it does not mean a massive stir in cultural values. It is one of the methods to add to existing comforts The 49.5 percent reservation to us (BCs SCs and STs put together) is, therefore seen by them as taking away the comforts of 49.5 percent of upper castes. But for us it is an altogether different matter. For us it is a source through which all on relatives and friends will get in touch with education, through which some of the villagers can get medical treatment for some complicated diseases....”

“Reservation in fact is one of the instruments of annihilation of caste. This is an economical and educational means to destroy caste bit by bit.”

(Extract from : Experience as Framework of Debate, *Economic and Political Weekly* Oct. 13,1990)



**WORKING TOWARDS
AN END ?**

OR



THE END

RusJam

Towards a New Consensus

However, much more harmful than all the 'flaws' in the proposed reservation policy was the manner in which most anti-reservationists expressed their opposition. This movement was viciously elitist and showed callous disregard for the sentiments and aspirations of the vast majority of this country's people. It is not just over reservations that this insensitivity is being made manifest. In other matters too the Indian elite is no longer ashamed or guilty about the appalling conditions under which large sections of our population live.

During the freedom movement leaders like Gandhi had been fairly successful in inculcating a healthy sense of social obligation among the Indian

elite. Instead of crudely seeking to protect and enhance their power and privileges, they were encouraged to think that they had to take some responsibility for bettering the life of the poor and disadvantaged sections of our society. Thus in the years following Independence, the elite continued to express, at least in words, a sense of responsibility in removing poverty and social injustice.

However, in the recent decades the Indian elite seems to have determinedly made a break with that legacy. They have come to treat India's poor as liabilities to be dispensed with. Instead of *garibi hatao* the dominant sentiment seems to be *garib hatao*. They are impatient with any measures that divert resources towards the poor, who are perceived as

impediments in the elite's grand designs for themselves. They talk of dismantling the licence-permit-petition-raj only to the extent that it affects them adversely. There is little care and concern to free the poor from the clutches of the bureaucracy or devising effective means to protect the poor from the rapacity of the rich.

When the elite in any society get to be brutally self seeking and altogether lose sense of social obligation, their lawless unrestrained self seeking begins to be emulated as a social norm by all other groups as well. Such a social atmosphere is least conducive to bringing about a more egalitarian, just and humane social order. Therefore, winning over sections of the elite in the struggle for social justice needs to be undertaken seriously. □