

Caste-based Reservation in India: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Reservation policy, especially the caste-based reservation system has emanated many controversies, discussions, and riots type agitations in India, some are in favour of and others are against the policy. Protagonists believe that the system can protect and uplift the weaker sections in the society. On the other side, the antagonists argued that caste-based reservation cannot improve the condition of the vast masses of the poor. The system contradicts the principle of secularism rather than uplifting the weaker communities in the country. To justify the debate, the present paper is the modest attempt to analyse pros and cons of caste-based reservation in India. The paper further tries to examine whether the existing system of reservation policy protects the weaker sections of the society or not.

Key Words: Caste-based reservation; Economic status-based reservation; Politics; Weaker communities

I. INTRODUCTION

The basic tenet of reservation in India is one of the forms of providing protection and preferential treatment to a weaker section (Teltumbde, 2009; Rai, 2002), and Article 16 of Indian Constitution also provides reservation of job employment to the socially and economically weaker section in the society (Choudhary, 1993). Over the years, two groups have emanated in the context of *caste-based reservation*. Those in favour of the policy argue that the system would help the state in reformulating and extending policies to ensure the upliftment of the deprived sections (Assadi, 2006; Thorat, 2005; Shah, 1985). On the other side, those arguing against the system believe that the system fails to protect poor, rather foster divisive tendencies within society (Samarendra, 2011; Upadhyay, 2011) Still, the issue remains inconclusive in the country.

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The genesis of caste-based reservation policy is concerned, it is basically originated from the practice of caste system (Samarendra, 2011; Upadhyay, 2011), or the *varna*, a convention which had its origins in the *Rig Veda* (Samarendra, 2011). Moreover, the complex issue of reservation system is a new phenomenon, born towards the end of 19th century in the course of and because of the census operations of colonial India (Samarendra, 2011). Since then, with the tireless efforts of selfish caste leaders and politicians have transformed the very system (caste) into a new platform of reservation, class stratification and division within the communities, primarily to garner their personal gain and vote bank (Smarendra, 2011; Desai and Dubey, 2011; Balagopal, 2005; Bhambhri, 2005). In the movement, the demand for extension of reservation has reached even to private sectors, which is beyond the purview of recruitment system (Thorat, 2005; Bhambhri, 2005). Unfortunately, this affirmative service is a mask worn by politicians to cater their specific constituencies and for the winning an election (Bhambhri, 2005; Pinto, 1994). Besides, they have created a situation where reservation amongst the reservation requires to be made in the country (Teltumbde, 2009; Balagopal, 2005). In this manner, India is currently passing thorough many self created hurdles and challenges, and the reservation system, especially the caste based-reservation system is one of them (Samarendra, 2011).

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

With the given notions of reservation, the present study is entirely neither in favour of the caste-based reservation nor against the system. The paper is the modest attempt to analyse pros and cons of caste-based reservation in India. Further, the paper evaluates whether the caste-based reservation policy can be lifted or not, if socio-economic condition of a group or family within the community improves over time.

To justify the objectives given above, randomly 20 employees and 10 students are interviewed during the period from last week of August to the second week of September 2011. Both (employees and students) are exclusively from the reserved category. They were interviewed (directly to the respondents or indirectly through third person) and asked their families' socio-economic and educational background, especially the parent/guardian. In the case of employees, only clerical/staff level is selected purposely as both the weaker and elite sections in the society possess the criteria (qualifications) of getting this level of employment.

The very 20 respondents (employees) are from the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, Imphal (10 respondents), Manipur University, Imphal (8 respondents), and Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore (2 respondents). In terms of student respondents (10 numbers), they are the students of North East India, pursuing their graduate and undergraduate courses in different management and technical (engineering and medical) Colleges of Bangalore, Mangalore and Mysore in Karnataka.

III. LITERATURE OF THE STUDY

Reservation policy, especially the caste-based reservation system has emanated many controversies, discussions, and riots type agitations in India, some are in favour of and others are against the policy (Misra, 1994; Pinto, 1994; Choudhary, 1993; Maitra, 1990; Bharati, 1990; Raman, 1986; Desai, 1981). Also, Throat (2006) found that despite reservation, SC/ST/OBC from other religion such as Muslim, Christian and Sikh religion suffered from lower access to higher education as compared with their higher caste counter part from these religions. The study of Desai and Dubey (2011) also found that India still continues to persistence of caste disparities in education, income and social networks. In this same line, Shah (1985) opined that the high class families among the poor are benefiting the fruits of reservation more than the lower class families of the same caste or community. Therefore, he recommended that the persons belonging to reserved category, who controlled the economic and political resources, and the persons with certain occupations and relatively large landholdings belonging to the traditionally low castes have to be excluded from the benefits of reservations.

Still, many scholars like, Rai (2002); Chalam (1990); Desai (1984) and others have opined that the caste system contradicts the principle of secularism of the country rather than uplifting the weaker communities. They said, reservation needs modification that a community falls under the reserved category are not fixed forever. They can be improved if equal opportunity is given and proper policies are in place.

To protect weaker sections in the society, Rai (2002) opined that one of the aims of preferential treatment might be compensatory justice. It is to provide counterbalancing benefits to those individuals who have been wrongfully injured in the past so that they could be brought up to the level of wealth and welfare that they would now have had if they had not been disadvantaged. This is the process through which a nation can minimise inequalities.

Balagopal (2005) opined that a community can become a reserved category only after the creamy layer is removed from the society. It is also clear that there exist some creamy layers in the reserved category communities and the government of India has also asked concerned authorities time and again to remove them from reserved category.

IV. RESERVATION ISSUES IN INDIA

The *Mandal Commission*, established in 1979 by the central government, was to identify and protect the socially or educationally backward people. It was also set up to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination on the criteria of social, economic, and educational indicators to determine backwardness (Upadhyay, 2011). Initially, special provisions and concessions for the educational advancement of backward classes of people were given and later on it was converted into caste reservations in educational institutions and for jobs. As for the public appointment of caste-based reservation, Chalam (1990) further pointed out that the Justice Party¹ in 1926 was the first time that had laid down caste-wise reservations for matters of public appointment in 1926.

Recently, the 93rd *Constitutional Amendment* allows the government to make special provisions for advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens, including their admission in aided or unaided private educational institutions. Gradually, this reservation policy is to be implemented in private institutions and companies as well. This move led to opposition from non-reserved category students, as the proposal reduced seats for the general (non-reserved) category from the existing 77.5 per cent to less than 50.5 per cent (Upadhyay, 2011). The issue of reservation and anti-reservation had erupted right after the country's independence in almost all the states from north to south and east to west, and widely debated. It was found in Bihar (Choudhary, 1993; Bharati, 1990); Uttar Pradesh (Misra, 1994); Gujarat (Desai, 1981); Karnataka (Pinto, 1994); Assam (Raman, 1986), but all of these found to be politically vested interest or political issues.

¹ The Justice Party, officially known as South Indian Liberal Federation, was a political party in the Madras Presidency of British India. The party was established in 1917 by T. M. Nair and Theagaroya Chetty as a result of a series of non-Brahmin conferences and meetings in the presidency. Communal division between Brahmins and non-Brahmins began in the presidency during the late 19th and early 20th century, mainly due to caste prejudices and disproportionate representation of Brahmins in government jobs.

Concentrating to the present argument of the paper, it is observed that the caste-based reservation policy in the country has become more complicated and involved controversies and criticism (Desai and Dubey, 2011; Balagopal, 2005; Thorat, 2005; Bhambhri, 2005; Rai, 2002; Misra, 1994; Choudhary, 1993; 1990; Chalam, 1990; Desai, 1981). To cite a few amongst many, during 1993-94, in Uttar Pradesh, the SP-BSP government's move to implement 27 percent reservations in education and employment of backward classes had backfired in the hill districts of Uttarakhand where the situation was very different from that in the plains (Misra, 1994)². Is this anti-reservation movement free from political bias?

Chinnaiah (2003) also blamed BJP for the movement to set up a commission to initiate a reservation system for the EBCs (economically poor among the upper castes). The issue of reservation has more often than not formed an important electoral issue for every party, especially on election eve and the BJP has not been an exception to this. Similarly, Kumar (2005) questioned Congress-led UPA government for initiating a dialogue on affirmative action including reservation in the private sector for dalits. This party in Maharashtra had even introduced a bill in this regard before the 2004 assembly polls and in Madhya Pradesh had implemented a supplier and dealership diversity for dalits in January 2002. Are not all these political melodramas and vote bank issues in the name of protection of poor community in the country?

In another instance, way back in 1978, in Assam, All Assam Tribal Student Union (AATSU) raised within All Assam Student Union (AASU) for the scrapping of reservations on the basis of caste and tribe and demanded reservations on the basis of economic criteria. Again, the same group demanded for the continuance and extension of reservations for the tribal and backward and depressed castes of Assam (Raman, 1986). This was a quite complex from the understanding of a lay man, but convenient for the caste leaders and politicians.

When we talk about the tribe, among the tribes in India, most backward groups are considered as primitive tribal (PT) groups and special attention/protection or reservation is given for the upliftment of these groups. With the given criteria³, 52 communities have been identified as 'Primitive' till the end of Fifth Five Year Plan, 72 in Sixth Five Year Plan, 74 in Seventh Five Year Plan. Now, it has raised to 75 communities in 1993 (Singha, 2011). It is quite interesting to note on the part of India's development

² This was a situation before the Uttarakhand was given separate statehood from the Uttar Pradesh.

³ Refer to Singha (2011)

scenario. As the economy develops, the number of poor communities, Primitive Tribal Groups also increase rapidly.

In terms of urban poverty, despite India's economic growth rate of 8 to 9 per cent of GDP, as per 2001 census, the urban poverty remained at 25 per cent and the slum population constituted 26.31 per cent of the urban population of the country, as estimated by *Committee on Slums*⁴ (Pranab Sen Committee 2010). Further, the committee projected that by 2017, the slum population will be increasing at the tune of 12.49 per cent in the country. This is the way how the politics and reservation are correlated and intertwined in the country.

V. ARGUMENT OF THE STUDY

Article 15(4) of Indian constitution empowers the government to make special provisions for advancement of backward classes. Similarly Article 16 provides for equality of opportunity in matters of employment or appointment to any post under the State. The biggest question that comes in front of us is whether the reservation system (community-based or caste-based reservation) has really benefited the weaker section within the society in the last 65 years?

TABLE 1 *Respondents' (Employees') Parental/guardian Economic Background*

<i>Parent's Qualification</i>			<i>Parent's Occupation</i>		
Qualification	Frequency	Percent	Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Illiterate	8	40.0	Govt. Employee (Non-Gazette)	7	35.0
Literate (Matriculate)	5	25.0	Govt. Employee (Gazette Officer)	3	15.0
Graduate	6	30.0	Business	1	5.0
PG	1	5.0	Farmer	8	40.0
			Politician, Social Worker	1	5.0
Total	20	100.0	Total	20	100.0

Source: Primary Survey

⁴ Accessed on 14th September 2011 and available at: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=71733>

To substantiate the argument of caste-based reservation policy in the country, *Table 1* portrays the socio-economic background of 20 reserved category employees in different organisations. It is seen that only 40 per cent of the employees' guardian/parent are illiterate and cultivator/farmer by profession. It is also interesting to note that 60 per cent of the employees' (who have entered under the reserved category) socio-economic background or parental status were as high as middle and upper class society. Here, the argument is- do the well-to-do category of employees (60 per cent of the sample respondent) need really protection? Since they are from the economically sound family (comparatively), their share/quota of reservation can be sacrificed for the people who cannot face open competition at all in the same community. It may not be necessary for protection of the 15 per cent (3 numbers) of employees of respondent whose parents/guardians are gazette officer. Detail survey result is given in the *Annexure 1* at the end of this text.

Similarly, *Table 2* reveals that hardly 10 per cent of the students' parents of respondents are illiterate and the remaining 90 per cent are from the well-to-do family. Another 30 per cent of the students are from the rural and remaining 70 per cent are from the urban areas (refer to *Annexure 2*). As mentioned above, the well-to-do 90 per cent of sampled/students who can compete and spend for the higher education should sacrifice their seats for the students of their same community who cannot pay for the higher education, cannot face in the open competition. These two tables also roughly depict the discrepancies of caste-based reservation in the country. It is also seen that the age-old reservation could not protect mass weaker sections, rather benefits the well-to-do class within the reserved category. Larger share of economically sound respondents (both students and employees) are benefiting from the reservation than the poor. Detail description of primary survey of *Table 2* is given in the *Annexure 2* at the end of the text.

TABLE 2 *Students Respondents' Parental Background*

<i>Parent/Guardian Qualification</i>			<i>Parent/Guardian Occupation</i>		
Qualification	Frequency	Percent	Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Illiterate	1	10.0	Govt. Employee (Non-Gazette)	1	10.0
Literate (Matriculate)	2	20.0	Govt. Employee (Gazette Officer)	3	30.0

<i>Parent/Guardian Qualification</i>			<i>Parent/Guardian Occupation</i>		
Graduate	3	30.0	Employee (Private)	2	20.0
Business	2	20.0	PG	3	30.0
Technician	1	10.0	Farmer	2	20.0
Total	10	100.0	Total	10	100.0

Source: Primary Survey

Having seen the discrepancies in the caste-based reservation policy, Kumar (2005) argued- why is the Congress-led government so eager to provide reservation to dalits in the private sector, where there has not been any genuine demand by the dalits for reservation in the private sector? Even the Backward and Minorities Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF), the biggest employee group of dalit employees, has not made this demand. Similarly, Chinnaiyah (2003) asked, why did BJP try to initiate reservation policy for poor upper caste communities when the party lost power in most of the states, except in Gujarat and everybody deserted the party? BJP being an anti-reservation party with pro-upper caste leanings suddenly seems to have transformed into an advocate for reservation. Is this reservation for poor? Since the objective is different, the delivery system will also be different from the basic tenet of reservation.

Upadhyay (2011) rose, after the 65 years of country's independence the benefits of reservation are being stolen away by the creamy layer of the society. It is evident that the number of poor people and slum dwellers in urban areas have increased at the faster rate (25 to 26 per cent), despite government's poverty eradication programmes in the country since independence. Similarly, if the reservation is meant for the protection and upliftment of the weaker section of the society, why has the number of primitive tribe group (PT) increased from 52 at the end of Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-79) to 75 PT groups in 1993? Or is the reservation policy an elusive agenda or is the policy meant for the politicians? Number of poor families, not only in the rural area but also the urban poor has been increasing rapidly in the country. For instances, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India (2010) is projecting the growth of urban slum poor population at the tune of 12.5 per cent in six years, from 93055983 populations to 104668340 populations in 2017.

If the protection or reservation is really for the poor people in the country, there are families within the general category who are much

poorer than the ST/ST/OBC or any other reserved categories. What provision has been taken for them? They are facing a severe educational and economical problem, but who may not be investigated because they are not coming under the purview of ST/SC/OBC or any other reserved category. Moreover, poorer communities may not necessarily belong to the ST/ST/OBC category. On the other side of the coin, within the SC/ST communities, many families are economically, educationally much better than the general category (at present, if not before). Is government trying to withdraw the mask of reservation from them?

In the case of tribe, the real paradox here is - if any community living in the hill region is considered as tribe and reservation for the development of them is needed, what will be the answer for the rich and highly respected families of hill tribes of Nagas, Kukis, Mizos and Garos, Khasis and Jayantias living in cities and plain region? On the other side, despite living in the hills, the Nepali communities living in Hill district of West Bengal (Darjeeling) and other north eastern region are not considered as tribe. The same is for the other caste communities too including dalits. If we are really heading towards the equality, it is not necessary that entire community should be categorised as reserved. Mayawati can fight for the upliftment of dalits but not necessarily with the mask of reservation.

VI. ALTERNATIVE TO CASTE-BASED RESERVATION

From the evidences and data, it is clear that the basic objective of reservation to protect weaker section of the society from discrimination is not fulfilled by the present caste-based reservation. Unfortunately, the benefits of reservation meant for the poor masses is being enjoyed either by the leaders of the community or the politicians or both. For instance, Rabri Devi is the lively example of mask of womens' reservation where her husband Laloo Prasad Yadav was the *de facto* Chief Minister in Bihar. Teltumbde (2011) clearly provoked that the reserved seat for woman is usually the wife or daughter or daughter-in-law of ex-Sarpanch/Minister who is made to sign papers, while the husband or father or the father-in-law is *de facto* in control. Therefore, it (reservation) is the better language of corruption of well-to-do people or politicians in the country. If the benefits of reservation are given spatially and equitably to the needy poor, the present question of huge disparity between the rich and poor should not have arisen in the country. To give an example, a tribe called, *Jenukuruba* in Karnataka with 60,000 populations does not have even a single degree

holder as the nation celebrates its 65th year of independence⁵. Who has taken Jenukuruba's share? Where has the reservation gone?

It is clear that the leaders and high caste communities have been enjoying the social and economic advantages from the system of caste hierarchy which they had created in the pre-independence era (Bhambhri, 2005; Pinto, 1994; Shah, 1985). It is also clear that the achievement of an individual is somewhat determined by his association and his community's involvement in the process or system (Desai and Dubey, 2011; Shah 1985), which the poor people are not qualified for.

From the arguments above, it is understood that the country needs to do lot of home works to uplift the weaker sections in the society, and the disparity among the communities has been widened as the nation emerged as super power in the world. For the reducing the disparity gap between the people, it is urged to strengthen reservation policy with major modification from the present system. As an alternative to the *Cast-based Reservation*, one option can be selected from the two suggestions given below.

First, the methodology given by Chalam (1990) to develop a weighted poverty index to deliver equal opportunity to the poor masses of the country is quite acceptable. Those families who have more and long lasting disadvantages should be given preference over the advanced within the community. In order to make it feasible, the incumbent will have to produce a certificate on the basis of weighted index as it is done in the case of caste certificates today. This certificate should be issued to all Indians irrespective of the caste, creed and religion. In this context, there is no question for caste or community in protecting a weaker individual.

Second, poor/weaker sections are to be provided equal environment for preparing competitions and to make the disadvantaged people more competition worthy than they are today. Once an individual is reached a threshold level of socio-economic condition equal to average limit in the society the mask of reservation should be removed and his/her quota/share should be allotted to another weaker (below the threshold level) family of the same community. As Narayana Murthy⁶, the Infosys founder also echoed that the people who are socially and economically disadvantaged by no means can be rescued fully by reservation policy in education or in employment alone in the country. Equal infrastructure of mpetition is needed for the poor, not reservation. For instance, protection or reservation may not be necessary for an individual who is intelligent enough for

⁵ Refer to Manish – "65 Years on, Abject Poverty Continues to Dog Tribal". Deccan Herald (Bangalore) Monday, August, 15, 2011 page 6.

⁶ As quoted by Assadi (2006)

civil service or UPSC exam. It is no that the dalit/caste/reserved category people cannot compete at all. They do not have any genetic problem. Only equal environment for competition is to be created. In this context, Kumar (2005) said “nobody even cares to note that there are millions of dalits who survive without availing of reservation”.

VII. CONCLUSION

Having analysed the pros and cons of caste-based reservation and basic tenet of reservation in India, the the present paper does not completely ignore the reservation system. In place of caste-based reservation, the study recommends for *Economic Status-based/Individual-based Reservation* depending on the socio-economic condition and other related factors, irrespective of the caste, creed, colour or the religion in the country. As the basic principle reservation is to protect weaker sections of the society, it may not be necessary for categorizing community into different castes or sub-caste (reservation among reservation) reservation. As the caste system or *varna* (categorizing community on the basis of profession) is eroding with the emergence of modernisation and development, caste-based reservation may not be necessary to revitalize, and may be replaced by *Economic Status-based/Individual-based Reservation* system. To execute the proposal of *Economic Status-based/Individual-based Reservation* depending on the socio-economic condition, a countrywide base-line survey can be done as household survey does.

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ANNEXURE 1 *Socio-economic Status of Sampled Employee (Reserved Category)*

Re- spon- dent/ Em- ployee	Sex	Quali- fication of Em- ployee	Year of Ser- vice	No. of Depen- dent of the Em- ployee	Quali- fica- tion of Parent	Occu- pation of Par- ent	Place of Par- ent
1	1	2	1	3	3	1	2
2	1	3	2	6	1	5	1
3	2	3	2	3	1	5	1
4	2	2	2	3	2	1	2
5	2	3	1	4	2	1	2
6	1	3	2	3	3	2	1
7	2	2	2	5	1	5	1
8	1	3	1	3	1	5	1
9	1	3	1	6	4	6	1
10	1	2	2	5	1	5	1
11	2	3	1	6	3	2	2
12	1	4	1	3	3	1	2
13	1	3	1	4	2	1	2
14	2	3	1	5	1	5	1
15	1	2	2	5	1	5	1
16	1	2	2	5	3	4	2
17	1	2	2	2	3	2	2
18	2	2	1	4	2	1	1
19	1	3	1	5	2	1	1
20	1	2	2	6	1	5	1

Source: Survey

Note: **Sex** (1 male; 2 female); **Employee Qualification** (1 Illiterate; 2 Literate/Matriculate; 3 Graduate; 4 PG); **Year of Service of Respondent** (1 less than 5 Years; 2 More than 5 Years) **No. of Dependents** (1 only 1; 2 only 2; 3 only 3; 4 only 4; 5 only 5; 6 more than 5); **Parent's Qualification** (1 Illiterate; 2 Literate/Matriculate; 3 Graduate; 4 PG); **Parent's Occupation** (1 Govt. Employee/Non Gazette; 2 Govt. Employee/Gazette Officer; 3 Business; 4 Farmer; 5 Politician/Social worker); **Place of Student** (1 Rural; 2 Urban)

ANNEXURE 2 *Socio-economic Status of Sampled Students (Reserved Category)*

<i>Respon- dent/Stu- dent</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Course</i>	<i>Guardian's Qualifica- tion</i>	<i>Guardian's Occupation</i>	<i>Place of Re- spondent</i>
1	1	2	2	2	2
2	1	1	2	5	2
3	1	1	3	1	2
4	1	3	3	3	2
5	1	1	4	3	2
6	2	3	4	2	1
7	2	2	4	2	2
8	1	3	1	4	2
9	2	4	3	5	1
10	1	1	5	4	1

Source: Survey

Note: **Sex** (1 male; 2 female); **Course** (1 Graduate Mgt; 2 BE/MBBS; 3 MBA/MCA; 4 Other Diploma Courses); **Guardian's Qualification** (1 Illiterate; 2 Literate/Matriculate; 3 Graduate; 4 PG; 5 Technical Expert/technician); **Guardian's Occupation** (1 Govt. Employee/Non Gazette; 2 Govt. Employee/Gazette Officer; 3 Business; 4 Farmer); **Place of Student** (1 Rural; 2 Urban)