

Reservation Agitations of Agrarians Castes In India; A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Recently various agrarian communities such as Patels in Gujarat, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, Jats in Haryana and Marathas in Maharashtra are demanding for Other Backward Castes (OBC) status in various states of India. Their demands are the result of the failure of the economic policies in India. However, these groups are already closer to the upper castes than to the more disadvantaged groups in their respective states. But these Communities had adversely been affected by the New Economic Policies introduced since 1991. After 1991, the government ignored the agriculture sector which affected these agrarian communities because they could not take non-farm sector activities because of their traits of independent working and entry barriers erected by traditional business communities. Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran in their research analyzed the socio-economic conditions of three significant agrarian communities of India by utilizing the India Human Development Survey 2011–12 information by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in a joint effort with the University of Maryland. Christopher Jefferlot also analyzed these agitations in the context of twin processes – Mandal (Implementation of reservation for OBCs) and Market (Economic liberalization). Mandal gave upward mobility to lower castes and the Market provided new opportunities to the service sector and offers higher returns to those who have better education skills and cultural capital. These dominant peasant castes do not have enough skills to compete, so they are excluded from this process.

The objective behind the introduction of the reservation system in India was to eliminate caste-based discrimination and to increase the representation of social and education backward groups in government jobs, education institutions, Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha. {Article 16(4), 46} But nowadays the fundamental spirit of the reservation has changed from a search of justice to accumulate more power. Previously it used to give a sense of politeness, peace, non-violence, suffering, pain, deprivation, consensus, protest, and persuasion which now have changed in the threat, aggression, violence, privilege, prestige, and power (Shiv Visvanathan). Agriculture distress, fragmentation of lands and lack of services and construction sector skills, shrinking social domination and Demands flamed by Politicians for vote bank purpose are the main reasons for Agrarian Caste Agitations. Under the great

pressure from the Agrarian castes, various state govt provided reservations to these communities. But the resolution passed by their respective legislature later struck down by the courts because the NCBC/ SCBCs in its report had declared them ineligible for the reservation. In short, providing reservations to these communities under their pressure will kill the fundamental spirit of reservation. Various scholars have worked on this problem. Christopher Jefferlot analyzed these agitations in the context of twin processes – Mandal (Implementation of reservation for OBCs) and Market (Economic liberalization). Mandal gave upward mobility to lower castes whereas the Market provided new opportunities to the service sector and offers higher returns to those who have better education and skills and cultural capital. These dominant castes do not have enough skills to compete, so they are excluded from this process. Recently various dominant castes such as Jats in Haryana, Patel in Gujarat, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh and the Maratha in Maharashtra are also demanding for reservation. Only reservation cannot be a panacea for the agrarian communities agitations because government jobs are shrinking and remaining quotas remain unfulfilled so instead of reservation more focus should be on creating jobs, reforming agriculture sector, promoting entrepreneurship, developing skill development

INTRODUCTION

India is a welfare state which promotes and protects the socio-economic rights of its citizens. Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) enshrined in part fourth of the Indian constitution reflects the intention of the welfare state. The government has made many efforts to implement DPSP for example Reservation has been provided for marginalized groups in government jobs, education institutions, Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha. The main objective of the reservation is to address caste-based discrimination, inequality, injustice and to increase participation of socially and educationally backward groups in administration. The reservation system in India started in British India. The first official order to provide reservation for Dalit-backward in India was issued in 1901 by King Shau Ji Maharaj (14-1722) of Kolhapur in Western India and came into effect from 1902. He reserved 50 seats for the students of backward castes in the state to ensure their participation in the administration. Later Miller Committee was formed in the state of Madras. The committee considered all communities to be backward except Brahmins. On 16 May 1921, the government accepted most of the recommendations of the Miller Committee and a Central Board was also formed for this so that the recommendation of the committee could be implemented in a planned manner.

The reservation system that exists today was introduced in 1932 when British Prime-Minister Ramsay Macdonald presented the 'Communal Award'. This made a provision for separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and the Dalits. This system was opposed by Mahatma Gandhi while B.R. Ambedkar supported it. To counter this situation Poona Pact was signed, according to which country would have a single Hindu electorate, with seats reserved for Dalit.

Meaning of Dominant castes and why are they demanding for reservation?

The concept of the dominant caste was used for the first by M.N. Srinivas. According to M, N Srinivas” A caste may be said to be dominant when it preponderates numerically over other castes and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low. “They control most of the land of rural India. The people of other lower castes look at them as their ‘reference group’ and try to imitate their behavior, ritual pattern, custom, and ideology. But in recent years due to the changing socio-economic and political structure of India, their situations are also changing. Once the castes that were against the reservation now demanding for reservation in details, there are following reasons why the dominant peasant castes are demanding of reservations-

First, Agriculture distress and decline of the rural economy –since the adoption of New Economic Policy (NEP-1991), the government ignored the agriculture sector, stopped subsidy on agriculture, and did not focus on appropriate new technology, research surveys, and better seeds, thus the productivity of agriculture decreased. Failure of crops due to instability of Monsoon, draughts, is another major reason of their agitations. Now agriculture is not, comparatively, as remunerative as city-based occupations since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. In Haryana, the growth rate of agriculture (3.3 percent) has been three times less than that of industry (9.5 percent) and almost four times less than that of the services (11.8 percent) over the last decade (2000-2010).

Second, Fragmentation of lands - The average size of landholding at the national level has come down from 2.28 hectares in 1970-71 to 1.16 ha in 2010-11. Worse, of all operational holdings, 67 percent belong to marginal farmers, who, on average, own 0.38 ha. Another 18 percent of operational holdings belong to small farmers, with an average holding of 1.42 ha. (Agriculture census 2010-11)

Third shrinking social, economic domains- The economic and social domain of these communities is shrinking rapidly, which they don’t want to lose, that’s why they are demanding reservation. (Jodhka) *

Fourth Empowerment of marginalized: Due to reservation the representation of marginalized communities has increased in government jobs and educational institutions significantly in the last few years. Reservation is now being considered as the only tool available for upward social mobility. So they are also demanding for reservation. (Shiv Visvanathan)

Fifth Political support- dominant castes are electorally and politically very powerful in a particular state, and they get support from political parties for vote bank politics. Before the general election of 2014 Jats were provided OBC status in nine states also. Dominant caste people remained in agriculture. They got benefit from the green revolution (in the case of Jats), and the milk revolution (in the case of Patel). Thus did not focus on education and government jobs. When they realized they no longer can depend on agriculture, so, they made their organization in the 1990s and demanded reservation (Sudha Pai)*

The sixth Envoy of other Dominant caste groups – These Dominant caste groups almost has the same social status equal to members of various communities like, Gujjars, Yadav, and Kunbi who enjoy reservation under OBC quota. (Ajit Kumar Singh)

To sum up, Agriculture distress, fragmentation of lands and lack of services and construction sector skills, shrinking social domination and Demands flamed by Politicians for vote bank purpose are the main reasons for Dominant Caste Agitations. Under the great pressure from the dominant caste, the various state government provided reservations to these communities. But the resolution passed by their respective legislature later struck down by the courts because the NCBC/ SCBCs in its report had declared them ineligible for the reservation. The perception of dominant castes on the reservation has changed multiple times.

A Brief History of Dominant castes agitation for reservation

Before Independence, Almost India witnessed the long demands of Dominant middle castes agitations. In this period they fought for their rights and equality and self-respect the various non-Brahmins middle castes like Vellar, Vaniyar, Vokkaliga, Lingayat Nair, Jats, Yadav, Gurjar, etc. Various movements, Castes associations, and organizations were set up to protest their interest. Truth-seekers society was formed by Jyotiphule to educate the lower castes. Under their pressure, both princely states and the British Administration provided them reservations.

After Independence, in the constitution Assembly debates Ambedkar supported the reservation to other backward Classes. And many articles were inserted to protect the interest in Backward Class. On 29 January 1953, Kaka kalekar commission was formed by the President, under the tutelage of Kaka Kalelkar. The purpose of this commission was to identify the backward castes and set the criteria and to recommend the necessary means/methods for their uplift so that they could contribute to the development of society and country. The Commission selected the following social, economic, educational and criteria

- (1) Low position in the Hindu Caste system
- (2) Lack of education in large sections of that society
- (3) Negligible participation in government services
- (4) Low transparency in trade, business, and industry.

The Kalekar Commission submitted its report to President in 1955 and a total of 239 castes were considered backward, but the members of this Commission believed that the basis of backwardness should not be caste but an economic basis. The government did not approve this report, and the states were given the right to form their commissions and follow their standards. And then provide a reservation.

On 20 December 1949, Pardhan Morarji Desai formed a commission under the chairmanship of the former Chief Minister of Bihar Bindeshwari Mandal. There were a total of four members in this commission. The Mandal Commission laid down eleven criteria based on social, economic, and educational norms, which indicated backwardness. The Commission

made its report on 31 December 1980 and considered 3743 castes as backward, and 52% of the total population was considered backward, In education and employment, total reservation of 27% was recommended when government implemented the Mandal Commission recommendation, some groups supported, as they were benefitted while some were against of the commission, as they did not get benefit.

Contemporary debates

Recently, the government has taken the step of granting constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes, this commission was given all the rights which were till now to the Scheduled Castes Commission. For this, two new provisions like section 338B and 342A have been added in the constitution. After adding these paragraphs, now the National Commission for Backward Classes constituted in 1993 will get the status of an autonomous body. The commission will also be a chairperson, vice-president, and two other experts including woman, and its employment, duration, qualification, will be determined by the President. It will be beneficial that now the states will send the recommendation directly to the center or commission to put a particular caste in the list of other backward classes. For this, they will no longer need to consult the Governor. Hence; States will now be free to list themselves. Various Agrarian Castes are demanding reservation in different states of the country. This step of the government is to deal with such agitators, because from now on, which caste will get reservation at the center, it done by the state government only but now, the recommendation of the Backward Classes Commission to include new castes in the reservation list will be subject to the acceptance of the Parliament. This will save the government from being subjected to political pressure and anger of these castes.

SOME STUDIES

Recently Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran in their article “Dominant or Backward” analyze various indicators of three Dominant castes i.e. Jats, Patel, and Marathas in their respective states. By comparing the data from India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of 2004-05 and IHDS 2011-12, they find that in most of the variables they are better off than OBC groups and SCs and STs in their respective states, and are closure to the forward castes. Only one fragment of these communities is poor. They are predominantly involved in agriculture and work on their land rather than as agriculture labourers. Comparing individual-level outcomes they find that three jatis are similar to forwarding castes.

“National” and “State” Backward Class Commissions have found that they are not backward and have adequately represented in state services. For example in Ram Singh and others vs. Union of India case, Supreme Court said that Jats are not social and educationally backward. The court made two points, first “Only historical injustice would certainly result in under the protection of a most deserving class of backward citizens.” And Backwardness should not be based on perceptions. Second, the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) recommendation can’t be rejected for providing the reservation. (Bhanu Pratap Mehta).

These agitations impact adversely on the society in every state. It has a serious impact on the marginalized sections of the state and public property. We have an example of Gujarat,

Haryana, Maharashtra, and many other states. At the agitation times, society is completely divided into Dominant vs. non-dominant groups. In the 1980s in Gujarat when the government provided reservation to other backward castes, the dominant caste, Patel reacted strongly and in this Anti reservation movement more than 100 people from marginalized sections were killed. In February 2016 in Haryana, When Jats demand reservations, incidents of inter-caste violence took place between Jats and Non-Jats across Haryana. Similarly in Maharashtra, rally after a rally was organized by the both Maratha and Non-Marathas people

CONCLUSION

In India, everyone wants the benefit of reservation, but they don't understand that it's not a poverty alienation program or privilege of backward communities. The main aim of the reservation is to address caste-based discrimination, injustice and inequality of historical disadvantage section of society, its more about representation not about acquiring power as most of the people understand. These Dominant castes which are socially economically and politically very strong are demanding for reservation. This is against the fundamental spirit of reservation. They consider getting a reservation is the solution to all problems, which doesn't look like.

We must accept the fact that only reservation cannot be a panacea or a solution of the dominant caste agitations as government jobs are shrinking and remaining quotas remain unfulfilled so instead of reservation more focus should be on improving the education sector, reforming agriculture sector, promoting entrepreneurship, developing skill development. Second, the Government must work on the sub-categorization of OBCs reservation. Till now the larger chunk of the reservation is going to some dominant castes that are in a better position. If govt divides the obc castes into different sections, then the real beneficiaries can get the real benefits.

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