

## **‘Reservations can help, and hurt too!’**

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The contention of a centre page article by Prof M S Sriram titled ‘Reservations have their own merit: inclusion’, published in this paper dated November 24, 2023, is certainly acceptable. But it should with a qualification that the extent of reservations be within sensible limits. The limit imposed by the Supreme Court at 50 per cent is sensible in Indian circumstances. The formula is just and fair, as it meets the need to provide for inclusiveness as well as enough scope for open competition on the basis of merit. A good scope for open merit creates an incentive to excel, which is very necessary for a country’s progress. It should not be ignored that the communities who get the benefit of reservations, are free to compete in the general pool of open merit, and those of them who succeed to get seats/jobs in the general pool are not counted in the reserved pool. This also is a right and just policy. Even at 50 per cent, reservation in India amounts to the largest extent of positive discrimination practised among the countries of the world. The reservation policy has worked well so far, as it has brought millions of persons from deprived communities into the economic, social, and political mainstream.

But political leaders are exploiting the increased levels of caste consciousness in the wake of the success of the reservation policy, to clamour for reservation for more and more communities or castes. These new claimants for extension of reservations are not from more deprived communities compared to castes which have got benefits so far, but belong to ‘dominant castes’, which are politically more powerful because of their larger numbers, and are also mostly classes owning land. Since any extension of reservation benefits to them within the existing ceiling would deprive those castes which are already beneficiaries of reservation, there is a clamour to raise the ceiling above 50 per cent. Tamil Nadu has a ceiling of 75 per cent, and Bihar has recently proposed it at 65 per cent. Some political leaders are even stating that the political and economic benefits of a caste should be proportionate to its population size! There is a demand for caste-wise census all over the country to facilitate it.

The implications of this seemingly just policy need to be well understood. Such a policy amounts simply to majoritarianism. The principle is applied in the case of delimitation of constituencies for elections. Southern states which are more developed and have consciously followed the national directive for family planning are set to be punished for this by being allocated fewer seats in the Parliament, than the northern states which are less developed and have not followed family planning. The northern states can dominate over the southern because of their higher population size. Would it be just and fair, and acceptable to the southern states? But the same situation holds in the case of castes too. The majority communities would then be justified in dominating over minority communities,

just because they are larger. India would then be a fascist-, caste democracy (if democracy at all), not a liberal democracy.

Instead of raising the ceiling set by the Supreme Court, it would be appropriate to accommodate more and more from the deprived castes, by excluding the creamy layer from the reservation benefits. It would create more space for the deprived. There are no doubt poor persons among even the dominant castes, but they can be brought under the Economically Backward Class, which is also a beneficiary of reservation. This has to be accompanied with a policy of excluding those among the reserved categories who have gained good success through a rise in their economic status, from the benefits of reservation. Once this principle is accepted, details of criteria can be worked out.

We should realise that reservation policy only *distributes* education and job opportunities available. The more important point is to *increase* these opportunities. An obsession with the reservation policy as the only or main solution to the problem of poverty and unemployment, diverts our attention from the more important issue of economic development of the country. The country should ensure that irrespective of caste or religion or region, nobody is hungry, poor, or unemployed. In spite the inclusive reservations up to 50 per cent (and more in some states) for many decades, India fares very poorly in terms of Global Hunger Index, and poverty and homelessness are not eradicated. This speaks eloquently about the limitations of the reservation policy.

An incidental but unfortunate side effect of the reservation of policy in India has been an unprecedented rise in caste consciousness which can lead to divisiveness. A policy of continuous exclusion of creamy layers from reservation benefits, coupled with increased quota for reservation for the economically backward from all castes and communities including minority religions, can dilute this caste consciousness. It will also make our country not only inclusive, but also more just and democratic.

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