

# Imperatives of Reservation Policy: A Perspective

**Dr.T.K.Chatterjee**

Former Registrar, University of North Bengal  
(tps.chatterjee@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*At independence, the Indian Constitution provided certain quotas or reservation in accessing education and jobs to India's most marginalized communities belonging to SC and ST categories for extending to them their rights to social justice. Subsequently, benefits of reservation were extended to those belonging to OBC categories. Over the successive decades, as economic development became skewed and highly tilted in favour of the rich and upper middle classes and as economic impoverishment continued to cripple the marginalized sections rather than improvement in respect of social indicators, a fierce debate spread out among the educated classes, particularly those belonging to the upper castes. They argued for scrapping the policies of reservation stating that in the dynamic transition of our society, there is no room for community identities and what is required is free competition to succeed in life.. On the other hand, national census and a host of data on human development indicators demonstrate the imperatives of not only continuation of reservation policy but also its effective implementation in the light of our national goal of building an inclusive, egalitarian, plural and democratic polity.*

## The Context

There is an eternal debate about the desirability of reservations in jobs and in admission in educational institutions in post-independent India. One of the several voices of protest against affirmative action in general and reservations in particular for the poor and marginalized sections of our population in the SC/ST/OBC categories is that the disadvantages arising out of poverty are not correlated to caste identity. A group of scholars, generally belonging to the upper-caste urban dwellers, argue that there are huge numbers of poor people across any group having distinct identity along cast, class, ethnicity or religious lines and each such group need special support of the state irrespective of identity. It is also argued that poverty-related disadvantages are randomly distributed between castes and there is no case for focusing on specific groups. In other words, they object to the concept of reservations for the SC/ST/OBC communities as an instrument of state intervention to ensure equity and social justice to these groups with the overall objective of breaking caste-barriers in accessing social mobility.

Another commentary against the policy of reservation relates to the fear of declining merit and other quality indicators in consequence, be it in education, professional jobs, services or other activities. The so-called cast-neutral scholars argue that the global standards of quality assurance required in higher education, particularly in technical and professional education, as well as in the world of services and jobs, call for entry only on merit to prevent murder of quality benchmarks.

## The Context

However, there are no data to validate these contentions. On the contrary, the experience of development in the states in South India where reservation is more deeply entrenched and the percentage of reservation is much more than 50%, proves that human resources from the backward castes could unleash their productive energy for economic growth as they came to terms with modern education. It has been well established by the level of development across other cities in India that reservations actually have contributed to nation-building besides generating more competitiveness and productivity among the stake holders in an ambience of social harmony and justice. In India, the system of reservation provides a mechanism of peaceful transformation of the cast-centered society and a redefinition of merit.

The latent casteism prevalent in the group of scholars and media under reference only reveals their stark hatred towards the communities bearing the load of deprivations over centuries but in the guise of cast-neutral contemporary urban India. In fact, the operations of cast-barriers and cast-hierarchies over centuries come as natural and eternal to the anti-reservationist lobby comprising a large section of upper cast intellectuals and media. What is even worse, the domination of the upper cast mindset among the wider public is such that these beliefs are not seen as casteist but their questioning is. It is also asserted that reservations were almost extinct before it was resurrected by the Mandal Commission and subsequently asserted by 93<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Constitution. These casteist arguments and loaded perceptions pose serious threats to social cohesion and national unity as these are aimed to keep the majority of our population entrenched in untouchability, illiteracy, underdevelopment, unemployment and poverty perpetuated by brahminical cast hierarchies.

## The imperatives of reservation

As presented above, one of the key issues in the debate over reservation policy is whether cast, as in SC/ST/OBC communities, is a factor in perpetuation of discriminations of all types resulting in poverty and marginalization. Dr. Aswini Deshpande (Economic & Political Weekly, June 17, 2006) has done an elaborate study to prove that the indicators of social advantage or lack of it are clearly stratified by caste. She has taken into account indicators like monthly per capita expenditure, land holding, occupational attainment, ownership of consumer assets, type of housing and poverty ratio among others from two national survey reports, namely, National Sample Survey (NSS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS). The Census Report was excluded because OBC as a separate category is not counted in this report. The study unequivocally reveals gross disparity between communities belonging to SC/ST/OBC and others (non-SC/ST/OBC) and that distribution of both income and wealth are highly skewed along cast lines. According to the data presented in the second round of NFHS, cast disparities in occupational attainment are: 68% of SCs, 75% of STs and 61% of OBCs are agricultural and manual labourers while for the upper castes it is 47%. Among the professional/managerial and higher level administrative jobs, the share of OBCs is 8% compared to 13% for the upper castes. In this study, the researcher has developed a Cast Development Index (CDI) based on five indicators like landholding, occupation, education, consumer durable ownership and asset ownership. It turns out that both in rural and urban India, the CDI for the SC, ST, OBC are much less than for others or the residual population. The data for OBC include the creamy layer of OBC in absence of separate data to account for the wide divergence that indeed exists within OBCs. Obviously, if the creamy layer is excluded, the status of the more disadvantaged OBC will be much poorer.

## The imperatives of reservation

The findings challenge the notion that social and economic disadvantages are randomly distributed among poor people and that there is no case for correlating deprivation with caste identity. It is now widely accepted that the cast –ridden Hindu Brahminical society has, over centuries, subjected the lower cast people to dual exploitations on the basis of both poverty and cast denying access to resources and pushing them to abject marginalization. The study has established a case for special intervention by the state for these groups with reservation quota in accessing education and jobs to bring to them the benefits of equity and social justice.

It needs to be emphasized that the disparities are not only hang over of the pre-independent past. Data released by the Govt. of India in various reports and the extant literature on the dalits reveal that inter-cast inequalities are not only very strong in contemporary India as measured by monthly per capita expenditure and other developmental indicators but these inequalities are steadily increasing together with wide regional variations. A similar situation exists in the labour market. There are pre-market discriminations afflicting the lower cast human resources due to differences in access and quality of education other than treatments meted out by the providers. In the job market too, discriminations and cast prejudices lead them to different kinds of jobs and different wages for similar jobs. Besides this, the role of cast in allocation of more traditional jobs in the rural belt is well documented. Additionally, casteist discriminations affect the job search process too. There is very little role of merit in job search where 'who you know' is often more important than 'what you know'. Various studies have revealed that even for highly qualified persons, there are big differences between dalits and others in job search process, eventual placement, salaries and waiting period and job types.

## Conclusion

The discussion presented above exhorts us to conclude that special support must be continued by the state to provide equity and social justice to the deprived and marginalized masses. Reservation of seats in admission to education institutions of any level and in jobs in public as well as in private sectors for the SC, ST, OBC categories is an urgent imperative in the interest of nation-building with social harmony and cohesion. Reservation is, however, just one component of affirmative action, though the most important. Other empowerment activities like stipends and scholarships, incentives to female students, sensitization programmes to avail education, preventing drop-out rates, remedial coaching, special coaching for competitive examinations, vocational and skill development training etc. need to be taken forward with equal earnestness. The democratic polity must ensure equal opportunities to all sections of the population for faster growth and development of the national economy. As enshrined in our Constitution, given the historical backwardness of the SC/ST/OBC groups in a cast-ridden social system, realization of a truly inclusive society requires that vigorous efforts in a mission-mode be implemented and concrete goals be set to break the cast barriers. This national calls for special focus to the dalits and oppressed castes through active reservation policy and other affirmative action in order to generate social mobility to them with complete equality of opportunities. Concurrently, it is necessary to monitor the outcomes very strictly in respect of both affirmative action and structural changes.