

Caste and class: On OBC sub-categorisation

There are inequalities and then there are inequalities within unequal entities. That reservation in jobs and education did address socio-economic disparities in India to some degree is true. But, equally, the benefits of reservation have not been distributed equitably, and large segments of the weaker sections and backward classes continue to have no access to quality education or meaningful employment. The relatively rich and dominant sections among the backward castes have tended to take up a disproportionately larger share of the reservation pie. The introduction of the concept of '[creamy layer](#)' to isolate the well-off among those eligible for reservation was initially perceived as an attempt to limit the benefits of reservation, and to politically divide the beneficiaries of reservation. But, properly implemented, it could have had the effect of allowing a more equitable spread of the benefits of reservation. The Union Cabinet's decision to set up a commission to examine the issue of [sub-categorisation of the Other Backward Classes](#) speaks to the long years of failure in effectively preventing large sections of the creamy layer from taking advantage of the quota system to the detriment of the poorer sections among their own caste groups. In effect, the Union government is now seeking to ensure a more equitable distribution of reservation benefits by further differentiating caste groups coming under backward classes on the basis of their levels of social and economic backwardness. If the categorisation of the creamy layer had been done consistently and uniformly, there would not have been any felt need to differentiate among the caste groups. The decision on sub-categorisation came on the same day the Cabinet decided to raise the ceiling for deciding who remains outside the creamy layer to those earning 8 lakh annually, an increase of 2 lakh. This is at cross-purposes with the move toward sub-categorisation, allowing as it does those with higher earnings to enjoy reservation benefits. The reservation pie is limited, and no group, whether rich or poor, dominant or subservient, can hope to gain except at the expense of another socio-economic category.

Vote-bank politics has a lot to do with the prioritising of caste-based categorisation over income-based differentiation to identify reservation beneficiaries. Political mobilisation on the basis of caste is far easier than on the basis of income, and the BJP is clearly trying to splinter the vote banks of the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The effort is to make other caste groups see dominant castes such as Yadavs as competitors for education and employment. Evidently, this kind of political mobilisation is not at odds with the BJP's greater stratagem of Hindu religious consolidation. But it may still result in leaving out the truly deserving from reservation benefits.

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