

IT IS TIME TO REVIEW INDIA'S RESERVATIONS ARCHITECTURE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

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The decision to extend reservations to Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Parliament and state assemblies is both a welcome move and on expected lines. When the Constitution was drafted, the provision was meant for a limited period of time. But this has persisted for two reasons. One, SCs and STs remain India's most marginalised communities. Atrocities persist. They remain underrepresented in the mainstream. Reserved seats ensure their voice is heard. Two, no party in India can be seen as acting against Dalit and tribal interests, for fear of losing their votes.

But while this extension is both understandable and necessary, it is time to review India's entire architecture of reservations. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations saw the extension of reservations in government positions to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This, too, could be understood in the context of their underrepresentation. But over the past three decades, reservations have been granted to a range of other groups. With the expansion of reservations to economically backward segments among general groups, the 50% limit set by the Supreme Court has been breached.

There are two issues. The first is conceptual. Reservation was a tool meant to address historical injustice, and create a level playing field. But it has come to be seen as a route to upward economic mobility, and even as an exercise in asserting power. The second issue is how the dreams of the founders, in which individual rights would become the primary marker of citizenship, remains unfulfilled. And group rights and collective identities end up reigning supreme. Even as the representation of Dalits and tribals in Parliament is assured, it is time to debate the rationale and record of ever-expanding reservations.

END

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