

OPINION

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

In a surprise move, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced 10% reservation for economically weaker sections among general caste groups. Within a week, the government pushed the bill in Parliament and it was approved without any resistance from the opposition. Socially disadvantaged and marginalized groups have been entitled to reservation in government jobs and higher educational institutions for some time now. But this has not stopped the demand for reservation among the excluded groups either through inclusion in existing categories or as additional reservation over and above the 49.5% ceiling fixed by a Constitution bench of Supreme Court.

Recent years have seen large-scale agitations by powerful groups such as Jats, Marathas and Patels for such reservations. Even though state and central governments have often yielded by legislating reservation for these groups, they have been struck down by the judiciary. Though the fate of the current bill is yet to be decided, with the matter pending in the highest court, there is every likelihood that this will be struck down. The fact that no major political party came out in opposition except some regional parties also implies that there is general acceptance to such a move. Although the bill has now become law with the President giving his approval to the bill, questions on what the law will achieve and whether it will serve the purpose for which it has been enacted remains unanswered.

Political compulsions behind such a move are no different from those faced by other governments which attempted the same. The fundamental problem remains the lack of adequate quantity of jobs in the economy. This discontent and frustration with the lack of jobs is also a result of worsening of existing jobs, particularly regular jobs. Recent decades have seen a sharp deterioration in the quality of jobs in both public and private sectors. Data from Annual Survey of Industries (ASI) clearly points out that the level of contractualization among manufacturing jobs increased from 19% in 1999-2000 to 34% of all workers by 2012-13. Most of these are informal jobs without social security and having poor working conditions. It is this which has put a high premium on government jobs, which, despite weakening of social security provisions and increasing contractual nature of jobs, remain the desired jobs. Newspaper headlines of 25 million people applying for 90,000 railway jobs and 3.7 million applying for 12,000 Gujarat government jobs highlight this preference. It is also not surprising to read about doctors, engineers and highly qualified youth applying for the lowest level of government jobs. As against this, the reality is that the absolute number of government jobs has declined in the last two decades.

Clearly, reservation for general castes does nothing to address this imbalance, which has gone from bad to worse in the last three decades. The minuscule number of new jobs is not even sufficient to replace retirees from government jobs. In any case, these are no substitutes for the problem of worsening of job quality and informalisation of the existing workforce. These are also inadequate for the other objective of providing equal access to employment opportunities to a large majority of rural poor and economically weaker sections of the society. The inequality of opportunity that exists among different sections of the population is a larger malaise and is only a small reflection of increasing inequalities in income and other dimensions. The fact that better-quality jobs are still cornered by those at the higher level of the income ladder is reinforced by the existence of large inequalities in access to education and health care. Private educational institutions are still out of purview of reservation and have no obligation to provide access to those who can't afford.

Clearly, both these issues are crying for attention for decades now. But the approach of the government through providing reservation neither addresses the larger problem of lack of decent jobs nor does it address the layers of inequalities of income and opportunities built on lack of good quality and free provision of higher education opportunities. The income criteria of 8 lakh per annum implies that the rich and those with better access will also corner the jobs under the quota. In a society where almost 90% of the general castes qualify for the quota, the provision of 10% quota is a cruel joke. It is unlikely that this will reach out to those who really deserve the support in enabling them to access the mainstream of economic growth.

Not only does the act fail to address any of the existing inequities which are the source of anxiety among the youth, it will further create complications with multiple requirements of documents and a layer of bureaucracy for jobs which either do not exist or are already accessed by those who need it. It also takes attention away from the primary issue of providing affirmative action to those who are excluded due to lack of income or access to better educational facilities. A better option would have been a provision of good-quality free higher education to those who are unable to access it and creating an enabling environment for better-quality jobs in private and public sector. On both these counts, this government has failed to live up to expectations.

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