

REVISITING SOCIAL JUSTICE UNDER THE DRAVIDIAN MODEL

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'Proactive measures are needed to add meaning to social justice principles under the Dravidian model' | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu has played a significant role in democratising the public space for wider participation. As emphasised by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M.K. Stalin recently, social justice has been the integral part of the Dravidian development model.

Social justice principles in Tamil Nadu were initially emphasised and propagated by Periyar, who fought for community-based representation while fighting the evils of the caste system. Even though the Dravidian social justice model was able to democratise the public sphere by opening the space in education and employment, there is a need to revisit many aspects of social justice to reach out and benefit more people.

The report of the first Backward Classes (BC) Commission, headed by A.N. Sattanathan, appointed by then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, in its report submitted in 1970 highlighted the unequal distribution of reservation benefits in favour of certain communities within backward castes. It further stated that around nine castes (that accounted for 11.3% of the total backward castes) held 48% of gazetted posts and 37% of non-gazetted posts. In the education sector, it was 47% of medical seats, 44% of engineering seats and 34% of scholarships denying an opportunity for the remaining 88.7% of backward castes in Tamil Nadu. Even though the Sattanathan commission had recommended economic criteria and taking out certain castes out of reservation benefits, due to political and electoral reasons, the government increased the quota for Other Backward Classes (OBC) from 25% to 31% and for Scheduled Castes (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST) from 16% to 18%.

In 1979, then Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran, based on the Sattanathan Commission report, introduced the creamy layer concept (ceiling limit of 9,000 per annum to be eligible for reservation benefits), which was politically resisted and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was forced to withdraw it after electoral defeat in 1980. The AIADMK government increased the Other Backward Classes quota from 31% to 50%, which made the Supreme Court of India direct the Tamil Nadu government to set up a second Backward Classes' Commission in the year 1982 to assess the ground reality. The commission, under J.A. Ambasankar, reiterated the unequal distribution of benefits among backward classes as stated by Sattanathan in the first Backward Classes Commission. The Ambasankar report stated that around 11 castes, which is around 34.8% of backward castes, held 50.7% of posts in the public service commission, 62.7% of seats in professional courses and 53.4% of government scholarships. The remaining 211 backward castes, which is around 65.2%, was poorly represented in government services and the educational system. The government added another 29 communities to backward classes without addressing the skewed representation.

In 1989, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government under M. Karunanidhi divided the 50% OBC reservation into 30% for backward classes and 20% for Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and de-notified communities (DNC) due to agitations led by Dr. S. Ramadoss of the Pattali Makkal Katchi, demanding more representation for the Vanniyar caste. Later, the AIADMK government under then Chief Minister Jayalalitha enacted the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of

Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State) Act, 1993, and got it under the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution to protect it against judicial scrutiny.

In 2000, then Chief Minister Karunanidhi released a white paper on the 'Reservation in Government Employment for the Adi Dravidars, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes and De-Notified Communities. In 96 government departments, the SC representation in Group A, B and C was far below their constitutionally mandated quota. The MBCs, who were allocated 20%, had only around 8% in the group 'A' category. The BC had more than majority representation. It was only in the Group D category that SC/STs and MBC/DNCs had noticeable representation. In public sector undertakings, apex cooperative institutions, universities, corporations and statutory bodies, SC representation was only around 3% and for MBC/DNCs, only around 7% in the Group 'A' category. BCs had more than a majority in this category also.

The neoliberal phase after the 1990s has expanded the scope of the private sector in key sectors of the Tamil Nadu economy which included social sectors such as education and health.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2019-20 report, 86% of colleges and 44% of universities in Tamil Nadu are owned by the private sector. With reservation not being applicable in the private sector, there is only 11% of the faculty from the SC community in Tamil Nadu according to this report. Even though OBC (no data for MBCs are available in the AISHE report) represent more than 70% of teaching positions in Tamil Nadu, SC/STs and the minorities are under-represented. Only 2.9% of faculty belong to Muslim community.

It is imperative for the Tamil Nadu government to release a white paper on reservations in Tamil Nadu to take stock of changes that have happened in the social composition of employees in the government sector after the year 2000. Apart from filling the SC/ST backlog vacancies, the government should increase the SC/ST reservations as their population according to the 2011 census is 21.1%. Further, the State government should pursue the policy of reservations in the private sector, which the DMK principally supported in its election manifesto. Reservation in private educational institutions has a constitutional mandate in Article 15(5), which came through 93rd Constitution Amendment Act in 2005. Such proactive measures are needed to add meaning to social justice principles under the Dravidian model.

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