

QUOTA MATH: ON MAHARASHTRA'S MARATHA RESERVATION PROPOSAL

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Structure of Indian Society incl. Caste system

After months of protests, the Maratha community has secured yet another [promise of reservation](#) in government jobs and educational institutions. The proposal has been cleared by the Maharashtra Cabinet, but is yet to be passed in the State Assembly. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis defended this saying it is in line with the recommendations of a State Backward Class Commission (SBCC) report, yet to be made public, mandating reservations for Marathas under a new, separate Socially and Educationally Backward Class category. Mr. Fadnavis said it was the report's assessment that Marathas are socially and educationally backward, with minuscule representation in government services, and the State is liable to take action considering the "extraordinary and exceptional conditions". As any move to include Marathas among Other Backward Classes will cause a backlash, the BJP-Shiv Sena government has sought to provide the reservations under a separate category. But when the previous Maharashtra government, of the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party coalition, in 2014 moved to reserve 16% of seats in government jobs and educational institutions, it was stayed by the Bombay High Court. Creating a separate category now would increase the overall quota beyond the 50% limit the Supreme Court has set.

The Cabinet's nod is in any case born of political exigency, not socio-economic reasons. The SBCC's reported findings that a significant proportion of Marathas constitute a socially and educationally backward class do not square with available data. As with Jats in Rajasthan and Patels in Gujarat, they enjoy a socio-economic status closer to that of the forward classes (and castes) in Maharashtra. Three previous SBCC assessments have indicated as much. Besides, there is no reason to argue that Marathas face any social stigma that calls for affirmative action. The demand for reservations in this case is therefore less an acknowledgement of social backwardness from a politically powerful community and more a call for the accrual of welfare benefits to less well-off sections among the community. The assertions of backwardness by sections of dominant communities such as Marathas, Patels and Jats have largely been due to perceptions about the relative inability to move up the economic ladder, and the lack of adequate employment opportunities amid a sluggish agrarian economy. Faced with violent protests, the Fadnavis government had to accept this demand, especially after the SBCC gave its stamp of approval, but there is little to suggest any substantial change since 2014 to justify it. As judicial scrutiny is bound to be brought to bear on the government's decision, it will be well-advised to look at measures to alleviate the State's prolonged agrarian distress and the lack of adequate jobs, problems that affect all sections of society.

Firm intervention is needed to end the unsavoury controversy in the CBI

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