

# BACK TO QUOTA

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

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The Maharashtra government has cleared reservation for the Maratha community in education and government jobs. The question now is whether this proposal can withstand judicial scrutiny and become policy. The courts have so far been clear that quotas, however rational the demand is, must not exceed the 50 per cent ceiling — twice, it has struck down the Marathas' claim. A 16 per cent quota for Marathas, as proposed by the government, will raise reservation in education and government jobs in Maharashtra to 68 per cent. So the proposal is headed to the courts even as the reasons that drove the Marathas to insist on reservation recede from view.

The Marathas, who constitute over 30 per cent of Maharashtra's population, are not a monolith. However, the campaign to consider the community, ignoring the many divides within, as a socially and educationally backward class has raised the spectre of a singular Maratha vote. The massive street mobilisations influenced the Fadnavis government to consider the quota demand favourably. The fact is both the petitioners as well as the government seem to think that quota is an easy way out of the myriad social and economic problems that confront the Marathas and other dominant caste groups. The Jats in Haryana, Patels in Gujarat and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh also seem to believe that reservations offer a redress to the crisis confronting them. Indeed, these predominantly agrarian communities have been hit by the rural distress, especially the crisis in agriculture, and their bid to seek education and alternative employment has been stymied by locational disadvantages. Quotas offer only a limited, short-term solution to these problems.

It is a failure of imagination of the leadership of these communities as well as the political parties representing them that reservation is seen as the only safety net that can address their concerns. Reservation is indeed an instrument to rectify social and educational backwardness, but it does not have solutions for every social and economic ailment. The government will have to expand the economic cake and create fresh opportunities so that people, especially young people, who leave agriculture are absorbed in non-farm sectors. There is a churn in the rural economy and old social hierarchies are being challenged. The restiveness of the peasant communities agitating for quotas also stems from the fear of losing privilege and the inability to engage imaginatively with change. The reservation debate has only helped to mask these issues.

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