

## Reimagining the OBC quota

Big crowd of Indian women vector avatar illustration - Indian woman representing different states/religions of India.

Regardless of the political impulse that led the government to announce creation of a committee to look into sub-categorisation of Other Backward Classes (OBC), it provides an opening to ensure social justice in an efficient manner. The biggest challenge India faces is that the groups perceived to be disadvantaged consist of a very large segment of Indian society, while public policies are highly limited in scope.

Some illustrative statistics are eye-opening. The National Sample Survey (NSS) data from 2011-12 show that about 19% of the sample claims to be Dalit, 9% Adivasi, and 44% OBC. While some of these claims may be aspirational rather than real, this totals a whopping 72%. Among the population aged 25-49, less than 7% have a college degree. By most estimates, less than 3% of the whole population is employed in government and public-sector jobs. Since reservations cover only half the college seats and public-sector jobs, the mismatch is obvious. A vast proportion of the population eligible for reservations must still compete for a tiny number of reserved and non-reserved category jobs. It is not surprising that there is tremendous internal competition within groups.

If we want reservations to make a significant difference in the lives of the marginalised groups, there are only two options. Either the government must drastically increase availability of government jobs and college seats or it must reduce the size of the population eligible for these benefits. While the Supreme Court would not allow reservations to exceed 50%, frankly it does not matter. Whether available public sector jobs cover 1.5% of the population or 3%, these will only offer opportunities to a minuscule fraction of individuals in reserved categories. Hence, the only viable option is to reduce the size of the eligible population, possibly along the lines of sub-categorisation proposed by the government.

However, while the media and claimants to the coveted OBC status such as Jats, Kapus and Patels are busy arguing over the merits of this proposal, very little attention is paid to the practical challenges facing sub-categorisation. How will we know which castes are the most disadvantaged? At the moment, the only reputable nationwide data on caste comes from the 1931 colonial Census and some of the ad hoc surveys conducted for specific castes.

The Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 was supposed to provide up-to-date comprehensive data. However, the results remain shrouded in mystery. When releasing poverty and deprivation data from the SECC in 2015, it was found that about 4.6 million distinct caste names, including names of gotra, surname and phonetic variations were returned, making the results almost impossible to interpret. For nearly 80 million individuals, caste data were believed to be erroneous. Since then we have heard little about the quality of caste data in SECC and even less about its results. In 2015, the then NITI Aayog Vice Chairperson, Arvind Panagariya, was asked to head a committee to chair the caste classification using SECC data. Little seems to have come of it.

It is not surprising that SECC data have not been able to shed light on socio-economic disadvantages faced by different caste groups: addition of caste information was an ill-conceived graft on what was supposed to be a Below Poverty Line (BPL) survey. This patchwork solution had to be adopted because in spite of widespread demands to include caste data in the Census of 2001 and 2011, the Office of the Registrar General was reluctant to add this burden to the decennial exercise. As a way of appeasing the OBC lobby, it was decided that the BPL census

would incorporate caste information.

After the probable failure of this effort, it would make sense to rethink collection of caste data in Census. Preparations for Census 2021 are ongoing. There is still time to create an expert group to evaluate the methodology for collecting caste data and include it in the Census forms. Losing this opportunity would leave us hanging for another 10 years without good data for undertaking sub-categorisation of OBC quota or evaluating claims to OBC status by groups like Jats and Patels.

A broader issue, however, focusses on whether we want to radically rethink our approach to affirmative action. What would it take to eliminate caste-based disadvantages in next three or four decades? A two-pronged approach that focusses on eliminating discrimination and expanding the proportion of population among the disadvantaged groups that benefits from affirmative action policies could be a solution.

The present policies focus on preferential admission to colleges and coveted institutions like IITs and IIMs. But these benefits may come too late in the life of a Kurmi or Gujjar child. Their disadvantage begins in early childhood and grows progressively at higher levels of education. The India Human Development Survey of 2011-12 found that among families where no adult has completed more than Class X, 59% children from the forward castes are able to read a simple paragraph while the proportion is only 48% for OBCs, 41% for Dalits and 35% for Adivasis. We know little about what goes on in schools to create these disadvantages but improving quality of education for all, including those from marginalised groups, must be a first step in addressing caste-based inequalities.

The second line of attack must focus on ensuring that benefits of reservations are widely spread. It makes little sense for a young man to obtain admission to a prestigious college, get admitted to a postgraduate course, get a job as an assistant professor, and be promoted to the position of a professor using the same caste certificate. It would make even less sense if his children are also able to obtain preferential treatment using the same caste certificate. Thus, use of the OBC quota must be limited to once in a person's lifetime, allowing for a churn in the population benefitting from reservations. Linking the Aadhaar card to use of benefits makes it possible that individuals use their caste certificates only once, spreading the benefits of reservations over a wider population.

The present move by the government to rethink OBC quota creates a wedge that could potentially be used to ensure that we have better data on caste-based disadvantages for future discourse. It is somewhat disheartening to think that even after 70 years of Independence, we still must rely on a colonial Census to tell us about the condition of various castes in India. It also indicates a mood that wants to ensure that the benefits of reservation are widely spread. Increased attempts at linking benefits to Aadhaar allow us with an option to ensure that reservation benefits are not captured by a few. Let us use this opportunity to reshape the nature of affirmative action in India.

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