

Morality and the Reservation Issue

Very often, a nation's interests come to be defined by special interest groups, that are constructed on various parameters of identity: caste, ethnicity, even class. This article analyses the reservation debate by drawing parallels between the protesting medical doctors and the idealistic, albeit misguided, youth heroes of Rang De Basanti.

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A popular Bollywood film, *Rang De Basanti*, juxtaposes the actions of Indian revolutionaries during the freedom struggle with the actions of a group of youths, whose friend, a fighter pilot is killed in an air crash caused by the corrupt dealings of a minister, and then kill him as an act of justice. The friends then choose to sacrifice their own lives to raise the consciousness of people to corruption and injustice.

This film caught the people's fancy with the question it dared to ask, and further, its attempt to give a sound solution. *Rang De Basanti*, which means "give me the colour red", has been a popular phrase in films on India's struggle for independence. Death meant sacrifice and the message behind such films has been that India's independence could not have been achieved otherwise. Therefore a film that asks for sacrifice in these mild, post-independent, "contemporary" times is a shocking anachronism. But people have greeted the film with wide approval and so it will not be trivial to learn a lesson or two from it.

The film is basically a critique of the "actions" of a group of individuals in the context of national policy and social injustice. Human actions are defined in the context they are performed in and can only be logically justified by individuals performing them. An individual as a citizen or social object is persistently defined by moral, economical, cultural and scientific (or astrological) concepts, which reflect and shape the commentary on his/her actions. Actions of men and nations are then sold by media today as sole material for defining historical questions. But it is the citizens' and nation's responsibility to approve or disapprove such actions.

In this vein, the film is a portrayal of acts of sacrifice by "citizens" in two different historical periods of the Indian nation, and it says that the nation still approves of aggressive sacrifice. This solution is brutal, but it meets with public approval, and the background plot of the film is an attempt to redefine the meaning of citizenship. The main plot addresses the contemporary political-corporate nexus and justifies and champions an act of violence and sacrifice that is unconstitutional but "the only way out". It is interesting to try and understand how these acts are logically justified and why it meets with the approval of the people and the answers will reveal to us interesting points that need to be made about the most recent of Indian political issues.

Recently, the Indian HRD minister, Arjun Singh, by raising the issue of reservations for the underprivileged in elite educational institutes has questioned prevailing Indian concepts of nation, national values, and progress. The right to give the underprivileged sections of society a chance at development has come under strong flak from special interest groups. We can term people belonging to the corporate and scientific culture as a special interest group working within the context of national and personal values. The medical associations and students of various colleges reacted sharply through the same old tried methods: protesting at the loss of merit, and issuing threats to strike.

We, as individuals and citizens of a democratic government, have had a preview of such conflicts on a regular basis. Each of us must make a choice to approve or disapprove the action of others. In metaphysical terms, the third party or the ordinary citizens' approval or disapproval is an important mechanism of maintaining

national and personal values. This article examines this problem, in the light of the popular success of *Rang De Basanti*, which implies that most Indians lack the courage and capacity to make tough decisions.

In the current state of national affairs in the country, we can identify several special interest groups, one for each occupation, caste, or cultural or ethnic identity, each with a self-defined code of conduct. A few examples would be: terrorist or extremist groups who wish to bring about their vision of a just world, United Nations bureaucrats, Art of Living devotees, OPEC operatives, Red Cross officials, and those of non-government organisations, entrepreneurs, World Bank types, WTO negotiators, and numerous political parties' actors. The issue touched upon in *Rang De Basanti* is not necessarily a description of social reality, but a justification of the ways and means adopted by a special interest group.

The special interest groups that form the basis of the plot in this article are political parties, the medical community, and the socially and economically backward classes. For the citizens it is crucial to either approve or disapprove the actions of its government and give ear to special interest groups working in the interests of the nation and society. But the problem nowadays is that it has become increasingly difficult to approve or disapprove actions of others. First, it is difficult to have "enough" background knowledge of the issue involved; more importantly we cannot define the criterion as to what kind of knowledge, if made available to all citizens, would facilitate a "rational" decision. Secondly, the issue is highly emotional and therefore the choice to be made is seriously problematic, though at the same time important.

In the early seventeenth century, a sceptical Scot by the name of Hume convincingly argued that there is no logic that can support an evaluation (approval or disapproval is an evaluation) based on facts or descriptions of social reality. History is witness to the fact that acts are not performed on the basis of rationality, but in the interest of special interest groups. An individual's approval or disapproval of another's action must depend on his/her own interest and ideology. The present conflict cannot be settled on the basis of facts or principles (like, should education be available to meritorious students only?). But this does not mean that any approval or disapproval is inherently irrational – the only problem that needs to be settled is as

to what criterion should the “intelligent citizen” choose to approve or disapprove another’s action. And to make this choice easy for the citizens this article presents various arguments and ideals to make the picture clearer. Unfortunately, this article too would be a victim of the theory it propounds, that no knowledge or criteria can facilitate a rational decision.

The first question that needs to be addressed about the present “situation” is the emotional weight of high ideals that the educated masses carry on their shoulders. There is an opinion that merit ought to be the sole criterion for admission to educational institutes. The wisdom in this principle is self-evident and any educated person will understand that it is the simplest and surest way to design fair and just systems. Even though many educational institutes at school level pride themselves in fostering a child with a well-rounded personality, fortunately such claims play no role when the student applies for higher education. Merit – as defined by the marks achieved – is the only measure of a student, and there can be no better or precise criterion known to us, or the lawmakers. Then why, do the lawmakers engage in doublespeak? And maybe the student community as a whole is quite right in demonstrating against the unjust measure that gives equality of opportunity to me, and my backward neighbour.

The issue that the government needs to address is not actually whether the quota system is pro-development or anti-progress. The main issue at stake is whether education is a right or a privilege. The argument of this article is that education in India has been made available as a privilege, not as a public right. Entry to higher educational institutions, and even to performing primary and secondary schools is based on the capacity to pay high fees, and the right social background, English-speaking, knowledge of world affairs, and right connections. This system is self-reinforcing since the merit it recognises is high marks acquired mostly by rote-learning, in texts defined for its own class – somewhat like all intelligence tests anywhere. Entry to the high-income medical profession is controlled by this special interest group defined process of social pre-selection, and termed “merit”. If merit in the medical profession is termed as reaching affordable medical help to most people, this system has shown itself to be without any merit. Doctors by and large despise living in rural areas, deal harshly with poor patients, and overcharge

them reducing many to penury below survival levels. High medical expenses are cited most often as cause of poverty or destitution. A few noteworthy instances, such as the sterling work carried out by Rajnikant Arole in the poverty-stricken Jambhed area of Marathwada, show that medical help is best reached to people by training people from poor and dalit communities as para-medics. The present hotly-debated “reservation issue” attempts to give entry to the medical profession to poor students who did not secure high marks in school-leaving certificates, because of their lack of familiarity with the English language or other data which come easily to wealthy families, or because they studied in badly-funded government schools, with poor teacher training. As the few professionals and high officials who have made it from backward communities recall, “reservations” did not mean that they could get medical or any other professional qualification other than in a level playing field.

Therefore, marks-defined merit even as a criterion to choose between good and average students is not a factor that should restrict equality in opportunity. Education is an opportunity that should be available to all students as a right, according to the president of India. Even though his statement rings with the highest ideal that can be asked from a patriarch, the real world lacks the capacity to achieve his ideal. The student and medical community need to understand that real world problems cannot be resolved through mathematical comparisons. A democratic government’s right to existence is not merely to provide an infrastructure for the best. A democratic government’s first and foremost responsibility must extend to the weakest and the most backward, the most numerous of its people. Otherwise the vast majority of the people are left to hope and put their faith in imaginative concepts like “the trickle-down effect”; a proposition devised to justify capitalist greed in society. But we may ask what can be a political party’s agenda in caring for the poor or backward, who cannot even afford the basic services available to “the common man”, who voices his opinion through the press, or through political action?

Myth of Special Interest Groups

“This common man” has become especially demanding in the context of recent economic reforms. He has spending power

and tools of technology coupled with quality education, which have handed him a more connected, satisfying and competitive lifestyle. Unfortunately “this common man” lives in the city, comprises a tiny minority and has a loud-mouth. He has again and again shown his ignorance about social reality except after an occasional *Rang De Basanti* style film, which arouses in him and the rest of India deep feelings of silly sentimentality and unity. He feels the government ought to listen to him because he has money power; that the government has to champion his cause in building amusement parks, and assure only his children the right to education.

Now, a politician lives in a high security zone and spends time in parliament, but to rake in support for his lifestyle he must understand the needs and problems of his constituents. A politician therefore should be credited to have a holistic idea about the inequalities that exist among his constituents. In fact, a politician would find it very difficult to stay in power if he or she did not have a basic picture, reflecting his constituents’ needs and use that to his advantage. Hence, it is in a politician’s special interest group’s imperative to feel deep connection with his constituents and reward that support by working for them. The present move by the Congress-led government is a clever one to assure itself strong support and grassroots popularity.

Even in the past, the Congress Party has “championed” the rights of the poor and backward. Indira Gandhi’s dramatic slogan of ‘garibi hatao’ (remove poverty) brought into power her majority government that was given full powers to rule. Nowadays the coalition government in power finds that democratic power sharing hinders the ability of individual political parties to work towards any single-point agenda without reference to the public. It is therefore in the interest of the Congress Party – and incidentally a reflection of Gandhian ideals – to give an opportunity to those who need it the most. To think of the “reservation” issue as an injustice done to the meritorious student is sloppy protest. Privilege to education should of course be made available to people with money power, by the government. But a political party has no need to restrain itself to demands of a minority that does not really count in its basic support structure.

This article does not try to deal directly with the “reservation” issue, or its pros and cons. What this article does wish to declare is that like any other issue, the reservation

issue too has two sides. So the important issue is not which side is “correct”, but which side has the imperative need to decide on the issue. This article began by asserting that an issue is determined by the actions of self-interest groups, rather than by any widely-defined disinterested “national or public” interest. Its preliminary conclusion is that the film’s wide public approval signifies that a self-interest group has the right and power to define a course of action for the larger community, provided it has the approval of the people. Hence, a political party as a special interest group would have the right to ensure that it reflects the needs and problems of its votebank. An empowering additionality would be to provide equality of opportunity to those who need it the most as an act of social justice. Further, it must be acknowledged by all other special interest groups that for a party in power to back down from enabling the quota system would be to ensure victory for other competing special interest groups.

Though it is the moral right of every “victim” to complain, it is not in the interest or a right of medical students, or any single special interest group to determine beforehand which side will be taken by the special interest group of the political party in power. All of us, as far as we are part of a special interest group, must maintain the will and power to ensure our goals; and no special interest group has the *sole* prerogative to manipulate a democratic government’s decisions, which are made in response to its own needs and those of the vast majority of its constituents who maintain it in power. It has already been pointed out that education is a privilege, so the educated and meritorious citizens’ protests are no more than a reflection of their desire to maintain this privilege for their own special interest group.

Now, let’s pull another political rabbit out of our reservation hat. The right to education cannot be founded on marks-based merit, for that suggests a new genre of systematic apartheid in the context of social reality as it exists in India today. Parents who are well-educated have the capacity and skill to educate their children well. Further, if the parents have money they have a capacity to send their children (the meritorious ones) to study at world-renowned (and expensive) centres of learning. But for those classes who have had a history of illiteracy it is a vicious circle of ignorance followed by ignorance, and inability to break out of this circle in the

face of upper-class resistance. There is no possible intervention that can be devised to break this circularity except by political discipline and decision. Those who argue for education only for the marks-meritorious are applying very palpably selfish and hence primitive standards to ensure the right to education only to their own circle.

Education promotes certain social skills; it definitely is not a commodity meant only for the wealthy – just like love, it can’t be bought with money. One cannot plug into it like electricity, and then expect there would be light. Right now, education is treated like teaching a monkey the latest monkey tricks; a monkey who has learnt monkey tricks has the power to escape the “poverty” of the jungle. In the civil spaces, performing monkeys win respect, acclaim and access to a lot of bananas. School-children who spend long hours learning monkey tricks at education and special coaching institutes are more precisely and carefully trained than their backward cousins. The key issue here is not what the monkey does, but what the master can teach. To say that education is for the meritorious only, adds insult to injury. This privilege is now being denied systematically and with such earnest emotion by the educated and the meritorious on national TV that it amounts to an injustice no different from that of apartheid. It is no different from the acts of the Third Reich proudly marching in beat with high ideals and earnest convictions about social justice, in full knowledge of its own Aryan superiority over Slavs, Jews, Gypsies, black and brown people, and decadent democracies.

It is the citizens’ prerogative to evaluate the actions and interests of the special interest groups of men and groups in power because in approving or disapproving they define national and personal values. It is in evaluating the interests and intentions of the same that the citizens determine issues regarding social justice.

Our acceptance of a particular line of political action depends on our own social context and interests. For instance, the government has the power to pass well-directed as well as thoughtless acts of legislation. It is in their power to do so. Similarly, the doctors have it in their power to save lives and ensure good and qualitative health, or to participate in political action neglectful of their sworn duties. It is not their purpose as an occupational group, or in their own group interests to define the

terms of social justice. Nor do they have the ownership of defining or deciding what social justice is. This right rests with not any one individual or group, but in the power of people’s approval or disapproval of democratic political actions. It is people who must take the initiative to decide. A theoretical debate about the pros and cons of reservation versus merit will never come to any conclusion. But that does not mean that it should lead to paralysis in the system. Only a political act can bring about public approval or disapproval in the longer run.

So who has the ownership over shaping social justice? Unfortunately it is at this point that human creativity and imagination fall short of giving a clear answer. How do we judge and support other people’s actions? This question needs to be raised because historically special interest groups have shaped and manipulated for centuries now the ideals for people to follow. In this context, Arjun Singh has been brave and daring to legislate for equality of opportunity. Without equality in opportunity there is no way that India can remedy its uniquely primitive situation. The medical community by questioning the quality of social justice has raised a new question about how much power should any special interest groups continue to have over the system, over the people. Of course the community has a right to protest, but from that it does not follow that they are the rightful champions to decide on the issue. A nation is built on acts of sacrifice and righteousness; individuals and groups perform the action while the nation approves or disapproves, thereby setting an example for the future. The backward classes, the great majority of Indians, need citizens’ intervention if they are to escape the oppressive actions of special interest groups and government forced upon them.

The anti-reservation protesters may imagine themselves as the youth in *Rang De Basanti*, but they are really only for the rich and privileged medical community. Perhaps, the audiences who cheered the violent protagonists of the film should cheer the pro-reservationists since they speak more for the national cause!

Political policy over an important hotly-debated issue may appear to be decided by the toss of a metaphorical coin. We must put our force behind one face of the coin or the other, since it rarely stands on edge. To follow that narrow middle path is a privilege that only saints and philosophers have time for. **PTW**