

KARNATAKA

The Muted Anti-Reservation Agitation

The current protests against reservation in Karnataka may appear to be largely political in nature. But the protests overlook the historical nature and the wider repercussions in the polity, society and economy that the issue of reservations has had in the state. As a group, the “other backward classes” have come to constitute a politically significant section of the populace. But even as the protests unfold over reservations in government-run higher education institutions, these overlook the fact that the OBC community is in a state of flux and divisions within them indicate that a new social coalition is in the making.

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When Mandal II sparked off a series of agitations by junior medical doctors in north India, everybody expected that it would snowball into a major controversy in south India in general and in Karnataka in particular. It disappointed many, for only a handful of medicos joined their counterparts – their agitation was tied up with the doctors taking decisions at AIIMS. They formed one organisation called Youth for Equality, and under its banner the politics of opposing the reservation was drawn up. Despite the Supreme Court’s intervention and decision, they decided to continue their peaceful agitation. Their modes of agitation were multiple: wearing black badges, relay hunger strikes, candle light processions, street plays, etc. Other than the doctors serving in government colleges, those in private colleges also joined the agitation. Their numbers would not be large – sometimes it would not cross more than 300 (for example, in Bangalore,

students from M S Ramaiah Medical College and M S Ramaiah Institute of Dental Sciences took part). Interestingly, it is a paradox that many OBCs among the medical fraternity also joined the ongoing agitation – their participation reflected the increasing ambiguous understanding about the issue of reservations itself, and secondly, many of the OBCs who participated were actually non-beneficiaries of reservation. They are the one who paid capitation fees to get into medical education. All these does not mean that the masses supported the anti-reservation, unlike the way when Venkatswamy Commission report deleted dominant castes from reservation list in 1983, but there was a discrete silence in the ongoing struggle – this requires an analysis of the reasons why in Karnataka anti-reservation agitation never became a popular movement nor received mass support.

“Mandal II” as it has come to be popularly called brought forth three important discourses in Karnataka. The first discourse saw Mandal II as a political ploy and

attempted to confront it politically. It is true that all issues are in the final analysis political, however one should not overlook the fact that reservation is basically a social issue, rooted in the past and is a contemporary treatment of retrenched social categories. The second important discourse comes from anti-reservationist perspective. This discourse centres around the apprehension of shrinking spaces for non-OBCs in national or central institutions in the event of domination by OBCs. In fact, this apprehension is not confined to the institutions alone, as the number of seats available to OBCs is much less as well as the fact that Karnataka has no IITs or central universities, except the IIM and an agricultural university. This apprehension is based on the possibility of appropriation of larger spaces by the OBCs and thereby shrinking spaces for others in the private as well as the public sectors. This is the reason why a couple of discourses or debates emanate from those who opposed reservation, many of them are trivial and simplistic: that it is against the country’s interest; it leads to inefficiency and restrict the growth and economy of the country; it could cause disintegration of country; it is a lopsided way of uplifting the less privileged; it reinforces casteism; it will hinder and checkmate the progress of private sector; it will reduce the credibility and competency of the people; and that it will lead to more brain drain. In fact, Narayana Murthy, the Infosys founder echoed this sentiment: “I firmly believe that there is considerable social injustice in the country and that we have to help the disadvantaged people to overcome this. The solution is not reservations in education or in employment. The solution is to make the disadvantaged people more competition worthy than they are today. I am 100 per cent behind the initiative of spending more money and effort in helping such disadvantaged people compete as equal competitors with the best people in the country. This is the only long-term sustainable solution” (*Times of India*, April 23, 2006). However his argument for more funds for educating the OBCs had few takers, especially the pro-reservationists who would argue in favour of more reservation than 27 per cent; a new generation of land reforms; and for accepting caste as a reality and demanding extension of reservation in all sectors, including judiciary, legislature and private. It is in the midst of such divergent discourses that one can locate the silence of large number

of masses, who would not venture into supporting the anti-reservationists by resorting to traditional tactics such as bandhs, hartals, long marches.

Reservation: History and Politics

There are many reasons why by and large most of the population appears to have remained silent or indifferent to the ongoing anti-reservation agitation in Karnataka. One important reason is the way Karnataka has introduced and thereby co-opted a large number of OBCs into the political structure, much earlier than in other states in India – in fact it can be traced back to colonial period. This does not mean that the process of “social engineering” or enlisting the social categories in the OBC list is complete – rather it is still an ongoing process. This is echoed in the first permanent Karnataka State Commission for Backward Class report or what is popularly called the Ravi Verma Committee report. The latter in its 2000 report stated that, “revision of the list of backward classes is absolutely necessary to provide relief to those who are genuinely backward” (The Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes, 2000:05). The second important reason is the way it has tackled the issues of OBCs – conceptualising, enlisting and categorising much earlier than other states. All these have helped Karnataka to emerge as a state, known for taking affirmative action much seriously as well as effectively than the north Indian states. Further this has helped in establishing a “cohesive OBC” block, despite attempts to divide it, which did not yield to the larger tactics of anti-reservationists. This is reflected in the way the new social coalition of AHINDA or Muslims, other backward classes and dalits (MOD), is emerging as a movement. Interestingly, the pro-reservationists are not only coming from OBCs but also from dalit categories too, including minorities.

One of the major problems that Karnataka politics confronted right from the colonial past is to conceptualise the OBCs: who constitute the OBCs? This is where the issues or questions of identity come into picture. In fact, OBCs are an “amorphous category”, who in the caste structure come under “upper/lower shudra category”. However, the different committees constituted in Karnataka constructed the category differently. The Mandal committee has identified 300 categories under “OBC” – this is basically derived from Havanur

Commission report of 1970s. In fact, initially in 1918, the backward classes were defined in terms of binary oppositions: brahmin vs non-brahmins or English educated/literate vs non-educated. However on a later date two criteria were adopted, besides, education and representation in the government service, sometimes the hold over the land was also taken into account. The other important problem was how to enlist different religious communities in the midst of the homogeneity argument. This problem was acute when reference was made to minorities such as Muslims, the latter are treated, in general, as single, homogeneous category without ethnic, socio-economic differences. Karnataka reservation policies solved this problem by bringing this category under OBCs – treating some of them such as ‘darveshi’, ‘laddafis’, i.e, as one who are in the socially and economically backward category.

The third important problem involved the resolution of matters such as exclusion or inclusion. In fact, the Karnataka state is one of the states, which included the different castes in OBC categories mechanically depending upon the social or the support bases of the regimes. The politics of adding new categories is apparent many a time. Even though the Supreme Court in the Indira Warshney case has clearly stated that, “inclusion of caste in the list of backward classes cannot be mechanical and cannot be done without adequate relevant data. Nor can it be done for extraneous reasons. Care should be taken that the forward castes do not get included in the backward castes list. In 1951, 18 castes were classified as backward classes; it rose to 165 in 1959.” In 1975 the then regime added 19 new castes as backward classes. In 1986 once again the regime added new 16¹ castes including forward communities such as veerashaivas lingayats. Interestingly, at present 70 per cent of the state population comes under the category of “backward class”. If we add even the creamy layer who also entered the state structure through the “backward class tag” then obviously the total population covered would be more than 90 per cent.

It is a fact right from 1977 till date, no caste or tribe, which is enlisted as backward class has been deleted from the list. The regimes just cannot do it. There are castes or communities which are identified as “forward” by different commissions, particularly the Chinnappa Reddy Commission that continue to be identified as “backward” till date. Different regimes

continue the same trend on an ad hoc basis, despite knowing the fact that the “forward” or dominant caste would benefit at the cost of other communities. Thus the, lingayats, vokkaligas – two dominant castes who continue to receive the benefit of being “backward classes”. The “backward class tag” has in fact benefited them more than any other community. Any alteration or change or even deletion of the communities has been seen as an attack on the larger identities of the communities. Even the regime does not want to antagonise its social bases too. This is apparent when the vokkaligas and lingayats vehemently opposed deletion of their community from the tag of being backward class by the Venkataswamy Commission in 1983. This led to massive protests against the commission report – kodavas demanded re-casting of BC report to include kodavas, nairs and kshatriya marathas sought BC tag, veerashaivas demanded scrapping of BC panel report; while the devangas and vishwakarmas oppose deleting of their name from the BC list, ganigas demanded rejection on the ground that they have been included as forward community, Muslims opposed because it removed chapparbands and darveshis as nomadic tribes. In the final analysis the then regime dumped the recommendations on flimsy grounds of bias, using of arbitrary indicators, pitfalls in the methodology, etc. Interestingly while opposing the commission report both the communities came together – it is here that a clear cut social coalition of dominant castes for a particular cause becomes evident.

In fact, Karnataka is one of the first states to introduce reservations for the OBC, other than Kolhapur long back in 1918. This was the fallout of the anti- or non-brahmin movement in the old princely state. However, anti/non-brahmin movement needs to be located much earlier in 1830 particularly in the nagar peasant uprising in the old Mysore region. This particular revolt is the only one peasant uprising, which completely changed the politics of the then princely state. At the same time it also brought anti-brahmanism into sharp focus. Secondly, the desire of the then princely state to introduce reservations for the OBCs is required to be seen in the larger framework of the social bases of the then princely state – the princely state derived its legitimacy largely from the OBCs for the simple reason that its rulers belonged to and came from backward classes (for example the wodeyars came from backward class).

The Leslie Miller Committee was the first committee appointed in 1918 by the then princely state of Mysore to study the possibility of awarding reservations to different social categories. Interestingly, the Miller Committee created categories principally on the basis of knowledge of English. "Knowledge of English was the only criterion by which 'forward' castes were distinguished from 'backward' castes by the committee". This created a binary opposition of categories: forward and backward. In other words there were only two groups: brahmins and non-brahmins. Incidentally, the brahmins, Anglo-Indians and Europeans came under the forward categories. In 1921 the then princely state reserved 75 per cent of the vacancies for the benefit of backward classes. On some occasion it did bring some minor modifications. However, in this politics the dominant caste benefited much more than any other categories, given their preponderance. This created spaces for the growth of the imagined social coalition, – OBCs minorities including the dominant castes on the one side and the upper castes on the other.

In 1951, after independence, the then regime, particularly the Congress used reservation as a means to create its social bases among all the social categories, and also in part a reflection of its national character. Towards this end it divided the communities into 18 groups and sanctioned separate reservations. This is where it did try to provide new identities to each group.

These 18 groups include brahmins, vokkaligas, lingayats, kurubas, bedas, gange, yadavas, kshatriyas, banajigas, vishwakarmas, upparas, kunchitigas, agasas, other Hindus including sadar lingayats, backward class, Muslims, Indian Christians, Anglo Indians and Europeans, and others who included Jains, Parsees, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs, etc. After the reorganisation of the state the then regime expanded to the number of categories to 165. At the same time the then regime introduced a ceiling on reservations – 57 per cent. Meanwhile it further divided OBCs into fourteen groups and saw to it that even with each group the 57 per cent reservation was applied. This particular order was quashed. This led to the appointment of Nagan Gowda Committee in 1960. This particular committee used three important criteria to identify the "backward classes": status of the communities in the social system as a whole; the literacy or education level of the communities overall; thirdly, the representation of communities

in the public sector or the state sector. This committee recommended preferential treatment for 214 castes and 50 per cent reservation in educational institutions and 45 per cent in government jobs. Further it treated all the categories within lingayats as "socially advanced communities". On the contrary, among the vokkaligas, except the bunts, it treated all the other categories as "backward". This is the reason why its recommendations were shelved. In fact, the then regime could not be able to ignore the recommendations on dominant castes such as lingayats – as it would jeopardise its own social base. Here lies its survival too. It is the one committee, which tried to see some categories among the minorities as part of backward classes.

A twist to the reservation policy came in 1975, when Deveraj Urs appointed the first Backward Class Commission under Havanur. This commission gave a new identity to OBCs in Karnataka, and thereby changed the social formation – from dominant caste politics to one dominated by Muslims/minorities, other backward classes and dalits (MOD). Its report has been called the "bible" 'red book' or even the 'Manifesto' etc, for the backward classes. In fact Mandal Commission largely borrowed the caste categories done by the Havanur Commission, especially from Karnataka. This is the first commission, which made a comprehensive survey of castes and communities in Karnataka. It adopted the criterion of hold over different aspects of the state structure by different caste groups, educational backwardness, particularly percentage of SSLC pass among different castes to construct the backward classes category. It divided the backward classes into three categories: backward caste, backward communities and backward tribe. It grouped 15 castes under the backward community category, 128 as backward castes and 62 as backward tribes, respectively. Its recommendations include 20 per cent reservation for backward communities, 10 per cent for backward castes and 5 per cent for backward tribes. The Havanur Commission report in the final analysis recommended reservation for 44.52 per cent of state population. Interestingly, the Havanur Commission did not recognise the lingayats, the dominant caste as worthy of reservation. However the vokkaligas would continue to receive the benefits of reservation. Later on 19 castes were added to the list.

The more controversial commission report submitted by the Venkataswamy

Commission report, appointed in 1983 by the then Janata Party. Other than adopting the criterion of SSLC pass percentage it adopted 17 other criteria to construct OBC identity. Further it also adopted the similar methodology of identifying categories in terms of their representation in the state structure. It divided the categories broadly into group A and group B. It identified 35 castes for benefits under article 15(4) and 31 under article 16(4). In total it recommended 27 per cent reservation to backward classes. However, its report was rejected for the simple reason that it excluded the dominant castes, particularly the vokkaligas and lingayats, from the purview of reservation. Interestingly the OBCs were categorised into A, B, C, D, E groups in 1986 and in the process, vokkaligas brought back under the category of backward classes.

The third important commission was appointed during the regime of Veerappa Moily in 1992, headed by O Chinnappa Reddy. This commission however went beyond the caste and community criterion and, in the process it declared several groups as backward and economically not strong. It broadly divided the classes into three broad categories: Group I where 52 castes were added; Group II – 14 caste and communities which include Christians, Buddhists and Muslims; Group III, which was an economic category – interestingly it also created categories of population which can be deleted from the benefits of backward class such as those whose parents are serving as Class I and Class II officers, or whose parents are doctors, lawyers, chartered accountants, income tax assesseees, financial and management consultants, dentists, engineer or architects or even those whose parents pay income tax, commercial tax or possess more than eight hectares of land or are graduates. However in 1994 the state government made more modifications and came out with a common list of backward classes who were grouped under broad four categories: (i) category I (includes 81 castes and additional sub-castes), numbering 5 per cent (most backward); (ii) category II (includes 114 castes and additional sub-castes), 28 per cent (more backward); (iii) category III (includes six castes and rural groups) – 12 per cent (backward); (iv) category IV (includes 12 groups of workers), 5 per cent (occupational group). Most interesting is the absurdity in the classification. For example, lingayats were classified as "most backward" under category I and "more backward" under category II, along with

sudras, SC converts to Christianity, Buddhists and Muslims under category II. Vokkaligas and Christians in rural areas are considered “backward” under category I. In the same year the then political regime made one more change – the backward classes were once again reclassified into six broad categories, thereby the reservations went up to 57 per cent and total reservations went up to 75 per cent.

However, the Supreme Court verdict in favour of 50 per cent of reservation had its consequences on the reservation policy of OBCs. This led the then regime in 1995 to reclassify again into five broad classification: group 1, 2A, 2B, 3A and 3B, categories. These five groups are overcrowded “with heavy population, while the quota of reservation for each category is highly inadequate to cater to the population under that category”. Although this is ad hoc categorisation, there are possibilities that it may remain permanent. In this ad hoc categorisation, every category, including two dominant castes comes under the purview of reservation – thereby almost 90 per cent of population is covered under reservation. However the apex court verdict of restricting the reservation to 50 per cent had two important consequences for reservation politics: one, it introduced the concept of creamy layer to avoid the benefits of reservation to the economically well off categories and two, it also helped in the appointment of a permanent backward class commission. In the latter case although the Ravi Verma Kumar Commission has made far-reaching suggestions, however they have not been implemented. It has also adhered to the ad hoc categorisation. In other words, Karnataka is one state which has restricted reservations to 50 per cent, but at the same time reservation brings under its coverage almost 90 per cent of the population. This is the reason why support to anti-reservation was not forthcoming from among the masses. Here lies the silence of the masses. This does not mean that the politics of OBC reservation is over. In fact new issues are emerging.

Emerging Issues

One of the issues much debated in recent days is of providing internal reservation to the OBCs. It conceals the larger agenda to divide the OBCs further into sub caste groups. This demand came as an offshoot of the AHINDA movement, the movement of backward classes, minorities and dalits to counter the hegemony of dominant castes

such as vokkaligas in Karnataka politics. This came at a time when the then deputy chief minister, Siddaramaiah, a kuruba who had a large following was thrown out by the JD(S) thinking that he would act as a rallying point against the Janata leader, Deve Gowda. Here it is not the simple politics of rivalry between two leaders, rather it involves the politics of castes too. To counter the growing influence of OBCs, the then coalition party (Congress and JD-S) raised the bogey cry of internal reservation within the OBC categories. The OBCs retaliated by organising a series of rallies under the banner of AHINDA (Muslims other backward classes and dalits), when earlier the social formation centred around MOVD (V representing the vokkaligas) [Assadi: 2004]. Now with the changing political equations the social formation has changed with the vokkaligas joining hands with lingayats – since then new social formation has taken place. This is nothing but LiVo – lingayats and vokkaligas on the one side and MOD on the other. The latter reflects the growth of a similar social formation that took place during 1970s under the regime of Deveraj Urs who was credited with introducing land reforms and bringing in a new social coalition that included hitherto marginalised entrenched castes in politics. In fact the demand for internal reservations within the OBCs has not snowballed into a major controversy. OBCs saw in this argument a larger design or ploy to further divide the already divided OBCs. OBCs are now confronted with two important conflictual categories: one, the dominant caste which is now demanding internal reservation, and two, the anti-reservationist. However with the growing strength of AHINDA movement – more than merely rhetorical, rallies changing and dividing the OBCs have become increasingly difficult. It is here their assertion as a monolithic entity or as a strong social coalition is slowly changing the political landscape of Karnataka.

The second important issue is to include some of the OBCs in scheduled tribe or scheduled caste categories. This would affect 46 caste or sub-castes in Karnataka. In the case of scheduled castes the attempt is to include such categories as madivalas, savitha samaja (barber), kambatti, maleu, sillejjyatha, killikyata, beda gampannia, konkanak karvi, mansuri, golla, kadugolla, kaniyan, navashudra, golladas, etc. In the case of scheduled tribes, there is an attempt to include such better off caste as upparra, idia, betta kurau, meda, dombi dasa,

mogaveera, hallaki, hindu kumbara, etc (Andolana, May 17, 2006).

Interestingly the OBCs are demanding not only the implementation of 27 per cent reservation, but their demand has increased further. One important demand is to implement reservation in judiciary, Parliament, state legislatures as well as in the private sector. Another demand is to increase the quota to 69 per cent, based on the total population of the OBCs. However, there is no clear-cut population census in India or in Karnataka. Most work on the census was done 20 years back – the same cannot hold well today even. In fact the number of unlisted categories has increased or expanded. This is the reason why there are demands to include ever newer categories into the larger category of OBCs – this demand came from such communities as urs, marathas, etc. In the latter case they demanded in recent years inclusion of their caste in II B category. There are many categories that still feel they have not been properly enlisted. The marginalised categories such as savitha, devanga, ganiga, tigala, kumbara and others claim that they have been denied a fair share in the reservations for backward classes in employment and education. Their main claim is to have the introduction of specified reservations for each group. Further there are demands to enhance the quotas “formation of a separate category to another”. Meanwhile there are other castes or sub-castes that wants an expanded list of OBCs so as to enlist them as OBCs. Further there is a demand to implement the second generation of land reforms. This is a genuine demand as it would release a number of social categories still depending upon land either as concealed tenants or sharecroppers including the agricultural labourers. This obviously also means that the land reforms have not been effectively implemented, in a uniform fashion, in Karnataka. It is true that despite the best efforts, land reforms in many pockets of Karnataka were defeated, though there are exception too. However, what is required is that the new generation of land reforms make the OBCs once again autonomous social categories who can participate in meaningful politics.

The most important issue is the need to create an economic space. It is true that the most of the time reservation has been used to demand political space rather than economic one. Controlling the economic sphere has not been the major issue in the politics of OBCs for the past 100 years –

thereby the OBCs, including the dalits, have hardly been able to capture the larger market, or enter the banking sector, hotel industry, information technology, shops in the cosmopolitan cities, etc. The “others” largely control even the knowledge economy. This demand would have the potential to bring in direct confrontation between those who are controlling the economy and the OBCs. Unless and until a shift is not taking place the position of the OBCs will remain the same. This is where one require new strategy, ideology and tactics to change the social relations both within and without

However, one final question is whether reservations have affected the growth rate in any way in Karnataka – this is where the pro-reservationists are consistently arguing. In fact this is quite contrary – Karnataka, which is one of the first states to introduce the reservations to the OBCs, the GDP rate has not declined, rather it has increased; it is one of the few states which is at the top of Human Development Index; it is fast emerging as knowledge state; it is also largely

what James Manor called “a cohesive society”. All these goes against what the anti-reservationists are arguing these days. This is where Karnataka differ from other states, particularly north India. **EPW**

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Note

1 These 16 caste include jetty, gatti, gudigara, thevar, baanhi, desh bhandari, kote kshtriya, kshatriya, maratha, raju maratha, Hindu sadar, somavamsa kshatriya, veershaiva lingayath, amma kodavas, bunt and Christians – which comes to around 23.57 per cent of population.

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