

A Reply to Sundaram and Ravi Srinivas

S SUBRAMANIAN

I am grateful to K Sundaram and to K Ravi Srinivas for having taken the trouble of commenting on my article. In what follows, I shall try to respond to their criticisms as best as I can. Given constraints on space, I shall mainly address Sundaram's discussion, which strikes me as being more straightforwardly directed at my article, while making references, where relevant, to Ravi Srinivas' comments.

I believe Sundaram's comment can be seen in the light of three major points he makes. First, he suggests that my argument is located in the format of a "handicap race" rather than in one of a "pre-assigned quota"; the latter is what is relevant to the context of discussion. Second, he suggests that skimming off the creamy layer among the backward caste group need not necessarily compromise the extent of backward caste representation in aggregate educational attainment. Third, he suggests that, contrary to my assertion, within-group inequality, at least in the matter of certain aspects of educational achievement, is more pronounced for the backward than

for the forward castes. I address each of these points in turn.

'Handicap Race' vs 'Pre-assigned Quota'

As I had tried to indicate in my article, my objective was to examine some possible implications of the creamy layer prescription for between-group equality, at a certain abstract level of the underlying principle involved. I had also warned that my approach was not intended to encompass nuance, nor complexity, nor a literal representation of reality. The idea was simply to convey (and to convey simply) the essential logic of a certain line of reasoning. Having said this, I believe it should be possible, at the expense of a little incremental complexity, to reformulate my "handicap race" argument into a corresponding "pre-assigned quota" argument.

Imagine, as before, that there are two castes (backward and forward: BC and FC respectively) and two economic classes (poor and rich: P and R respectively). Suppose four seats are available for admission to a professional college, and that there are 10 candidates competing for the seats. Of these, let us suppose that

three candidates are PBC, three RBC, two PFC and two RFC. The distribution of marks is: 70 for each of the three PBC candidates, 76 for each of the three RBC candidates, 83 for each of the two PFC candidates, and 85 for each of the two RFC candidates.

In the absence of any quota provision for those that may be perceived to constitute disadvantaged groups, and assuming a qualifying mark of 82 (Case I), the selected candidates will be the two RFCs and the two PFCs. Suppose now that a 50 per cent quota is reserved for the backward caste, with a qualifying mark of 75 for the reserved category and one of 82 for the open category (Case II). Then, the selected candidates will be the two RFCs and any two of the three RBCs. Next, suppose we have a scheme of 50 per cent reservation, with a qualifying mark of 75, for backward caste persons, but provided only that they are also poor, and a qualifying mark of 82 for the open category (Case III). Then, the caste quota will be of no avail to the three PBC candidates because of their low marks, while the three RBC individuals, because of their creamy layer status, will have to compete in the open category, where they will lose out to the two RFC and the two PFC candidates. Finally, consider a scheme (Scheme IV) in which 50 per cent of the seats are reserved for caste backwardness, with a qualifying mark of 75, and 25 per cent are reserved for economic backwardness (irrespective of caste affiliation), with a qualifying mark of 80, while the qualifying mark in the open category is 82: in this case, and given the specific, assumed distribution of marks across the castes and the classes, two of the three RBC candidates will be selected under the caste quota, one of the two PFC candidates will be selected under the "poverty quota", and one of the two RFC candidates will be selected in the open category.

In Cases I and III, the backward caste candidates find no representation in the set of selected persons (the creamy layer criterion is consequentially equivalent to the no-compensatory-discrimination outcome); and Schemes II and IV ensure that 50 per cent of the selected candidates belong to the backward caste, with Scheme IV ensuring that the open category seats are not confined to the rich among the forward caste. These "pre-assigned quota" outcomes are very similar to their original "handicap race" counterparts dealt with in my article.

I might as well state here, explicitly, that I have carefully selected the numbers required to yield the above results. The example I have dealt with was intended to illustrate the proposition that implementation of the creamy layer principle could exacerbate caste disparities in access to education. If, in line with Ravi Srinivas' complaint, this is an exercise in tautology, I am afraid there is no help for it. An example explicitly intended to illustrate a certain proposition must presumably end up illustrating it. I would imagine this is in the nature of things. Arising from which, if there is little to be said for making a virtue of necessity, then there is equally little to be said for making a vice of necessity. On the other hand, if the BC-FC gap in academic performance is quite narrow, one wonders what to make of the common FC lamentation that "quality" and "merit" are being crucified at the altar of reservation.

Creamy Layer Criterion and Backward Caste Representation

The second point which Sundaram makes is grounded in useful empirical work. (Ravi Srinivas complains that I myself have not offered any findings from empirical study. Apart from the fact that I did not make any

claims to the contrary, all I can say is that I am very happy for him, or anyone else, to engage in the requisite empirical research.) The import of Sundaram's data-based analysis can be reformulated in the following simple terms. Let Q stand for the number of seats allotted to the backward caste under a quota reservation system, and let E be the number of eligible candidates from the backward caste. One of the "essentially empirical questions" which Sundaram suggests should be addressed in assessing whether the implementation of a creamy layer criterion could adversely affect backward caste representation in admissions, is that of the relative magnitudes of Q and E . If E is greater than Q , then – Sundaram seems to infer – the basis for the apprehension just mentioned is removed. Let us suppose that E is indeed greater than Q , and let D be the (positive) difference between E and Q . Further, let CL be the size of the identified "creamy layer". The positivity of D is just one of the empirical questions that needs to be checked. Another important question is the size of CL . If CL is greater than D , then the basis for the apprehension outlined earlier is not removed.

Why should one object to implementation of a creamy layer criterion if $CL \leq D$? This begs a prior question: why have a

creamy layer criterion at all? Once the legitimacy of the principle is acknowledged, it is a matter of the camel's head in the tent. The debate will quickly shift to where the size of CL should be pitched. One should be possessed of an uncommonly large stock of naivete to believe that the aggressive, broomstick-wielding votaries of the creamy layer principle will have any use for that principle if $CL \leq D$. Empirical information is available not only in columns of data in census or NSSO publications, but out there on the streets as well! But apart from instrumental reasons, there are also intrinsic ones for treading warily in the presence of the creamy layer principle.

I would like to reiterate the point made in my article – that affirmative action relates to questions of inter-group, not intra-group, equality. Restricting the creamy layer principle to cases in which $CL \leq D$ can only be motivated by a pure concern for within-group equality among members of the backward caste. It is one thing to express this concern in exhortatory terms, but another to seek legislative endorsement for it; also, there is a strong case for permitting these concerns to emerge more "organically"



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from within the backward caste community itself.

Second, if concerns of within-group equality must be imported into the discourse, why restrict these concerns only to the backward caste? Sundaram does seem to endorse a more even-handed approach to the issue of intra-group equality when he says: "...even as one accepts the need to address inequalities in access to higher education among the forward castes by substantially expanding the availability to them of means-based scholarships, there is a strong case for excluding the creamy layer of the backward castes in a quota regime". Why is the redress of forward caste inequality located in "substantially expanding the availability of means-based scholarships", while the redress of backward caste inequality is located in skimming off the creamy layer? Notice that the eligibility criterion, in terms of qualifying marks, would become more stringent for the backward caste creamy layer members if they were graduated out of the quota ambit into the open category. A more consistent approach would be to

either (a) simply substantially expand the availability of means-based scholarships to the more disadvantaged members of the backward caste or (b) implement a creamy layer criterion (subject to $CL \leq D$) for the backward caste and implement a similar equality-preferring scheme of differentially higher qualifying marks for the forward caste creamy layer. One has to wonder if all the complexity of backward and forward caste creamy layer identification, together with the problem of coming up with a satisfactory scheme of differentiated eligibility criteria, would indeed be worth the trouble.

There is no question of refusing to acknowledge that some defendants of the creamy layer principle are motivated by a pure concern for within-group backward caste equality (though, as argued above, it is not clear that implementation of a creamy layer criterion is the appropriate solution to their problem). Having said this, I would reiterate a point made in my earlier article: that, often enough, there is a difference between the real and professed reasons for favouring the creamy layer

principle. It is not even always evident that votaries of the principle are, in fact, themselves self-consciously aware of the difference. In this connection, I shall confine myself to observing briefly that Ravi Srinivas holds both of the following views: "The purpose of excluding the creamy layer is to ensure that the benefits of reservation are available to the most deserving among BCs" and "Even a cursory look at the [creamy layer] criteria would show that the idea was to ensure that socially and educationally advanced persons do not corner reservations in the name of social justice for OBCs....BC candidates are much better placed than FC candidates". The concern for equality within the backward caste group is apparently not so narrow as to exclude a note of grievance on behalf of the forward caste group. Incidentally, the remark that "[i]f all groups classified as backward classes are equal to each other and get reservation benefits equally there would have been no need to divide the reservation quota further" is misplaced: it seems to take no account of the point I had made in my earlier article,

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that "...no matter how distributed, if the average for a currently disadvantaged group rises sufficiently over time, then that should be a signal for moving the group out of the ambit of preferential treatment".

Within-Group Inequality

Finally, I address Sundaram's third point on the empirical validity of greater within-group inequality in the distribution of resources for the forward than for the backward caste. I am afraid there is a straightforward misunderstanding here. I did not say that there is greater inequality in the distribution of educational attainment in the forward caste group than in the backward caste group – I could not have, for a reason which I will discuss in the next paragraph. What I did say is: "...if it is fair to import considerations of within-group inequality into the discourse, then there is a strong case for being even-handed in the matter – indeed, the more so because it is well known that the intra-group distribution of resources is more unequal among the forward than the backward castes". For instance, data in the 1991-92 NSS survey on Assets and Liabilities of Rural and Urban Households suggest that at the all-India level, in each of the rural and urban areas, both the Gini and the Theil indices of inequality in the distribution of household assets were lower for the scheduled caste and tribe group than for the non-scheduled caste and tribe group. Yet, there is little evidence of prescriptions for within-group redistribution of assets among the forward caste group – which marks a strong contrast from the strangely solicitous concern for inequality in the distribution of educational attainment within the backward caste group. In any event, and for the point I was stressing, it suffices that there be a finite level of inequality in the distribution of resources among the forward caste; it is not necessary that this level be higher than what it is for the backward caste.

Insofar as the within-group distribution of educational attainment is concerned, one should expect, at the outset, that the Gini coefficient of inequality will be higher for the backward than for the forward caste, and a reverse-claim would be a priori indefensible. The reason for this is discussed in what follows. When, for example, we speak of those with or without a higher secondary certificate, we are speaking of a binary variable which takes the value 0 for those who are deprived, and

the value 1 for those who are not deprived. For a population of size n , if the mean of the distribution under review is m , and if n is sufficiently large, the Gini coefficient G can be approximated by the expression $1 - (2/n^2m)\sum_{i=1}^n(n+1-i)x_i$, where x_i is the i th poorest person's resource level. If x_i is interpreted as the i th poorest person's headcount ratio of access to a given state of educational achievement, then x_i is either zero or one, and it is very easy to verify that G is simply H , where H is the proportion of the population without access to the educational achievement in question. One must expect H – and therefore G – to be lower for the forward than for the backward caste group. For the distribution of a binary (0-1)-valued variable, it just so happens that G (an index of disparity) coincides with H (an index of deprivation): the group with lower inequality is simply the less deprived group. In such a situation, within-group inequality is just a manifestation of group poverty.

The above considerations are relevant for Sundaram's finding that "in respect of urban youth in the 17-25 age-group, relative to the distribution of population of each social group across expenditure groups defining quintiles of the total urban population, the distribution of population with a higher secondary certificate or of those currently attending under-graduate courses or of those with a 'Graduate and Above' level of completed education, is in fact more unequal among the backward castes than among the forward castes". I take it that the "Gini coefficients" reported in his table relate to the caste-wise distribution of educational attainment across expenditure groups; and if this is so, the result he obtains is not surprising in a situation, as is generally the case, where educational attainment is an increasing function of income.

For example, let (x_1, \dots, x_{10}) be a ten-vector of income levels arranged in ascending order, viz., $x_1 < x_2 < \dots < x_{10}$. If the headcount ratio H of, say, failure to enter college, is 70 per cent (call this Case A), it is likely that the entrants to college will be the three richest persons, namely individuals 8, 9, and 10. If the headcount ratio declines to 50 per cent (call this Case B), the likely entrants would be the five richest persons, namely individuals 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. As deprivation declines, concentration also tends to get diluted with a percolation of educational attainment down the income ladder. Since deprivation in the forward caste is lower

than in the backward caste, one must expect there to be less income-related concentration of educational achievement in the former than in the latter.

Interestingly, this suggests that there could be two ways of diluting concentration. Going back to Case A, let us imagine that it describes the backward caste distribution in a situation where there is a 30 per cent quota and all of it has been "cornered" by the richest individuals (8, 9 and 10). One could now aim at one of two stratagems. First, one could retain H at 0.7 and arrange – by, say, skimming off the creamy layer (persons 9 and 10) – for persons 6, 7 and 8 to enter college. Alternatively, one could seek to reduce the educational deprivation rate from 0.7 to 0.5, and dilute concentration by transiting from Case A to Case B. The latter stratagem, surely, is preferable. One obvious means to this end would be to increase the size of the quota (from 30 per cent to 50 per cent) – a possible prescription that flows out of Sundaram's finding. Somehow, I get the feeling that Sundaram may not endorse the prescription!

Concluding Observations

In the end, it is vitally important that positions should be advanced, or defended, or rebutted, through recourse to logic and reasoning. But surely, a fine-grained sense of arithmetic is only aided by a sense of perspective as well. The latter should assist in recognising that, in the matter of caste in India, there are rather more urgent issues of justice to contend with than resisting a perceived "unfairness" in some particular arrangement of preferential treatment. In a very general way, such a recognition, informed as it would be by a little less flintiness and a little more generosity of spirit, can create the conditions for a vastly more productive discussion of issues relating to compensatory discrimination than appears now to be the case. I cannot hope to improve upon the sentiment expressed by my well-remembered friend S Guhan, when he said:

There can be constructive debate on these practical matters but what is of prior importance is to agree that philosophically and politically social discrimination in India has to be corrected through concrete measures for social justice. The process is bound to be painful, but we should accept the pain as the necessary concomitant of the maturation of our society and nation. EPW

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