



## HISTORY (OPTIONAL) By Manikant Singh



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# The key to revitalising India's reservation system

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A socio-economic caste-based census becomes a necessary precondition to initiate any meaningful reform.

Hoardings and posters lauding the Narendra Modi government for introducing reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) examinations and a renewed debate on caste census have once again brought the debate on affirmative action in the limelight. The affirmative action programme that was envisaged during the founding moments of the republic is indeed one of the remarkable provisions to have been worked out by our Constitution makers. It has been historically significant in enunciating the principle of justice in a deeply unequal and oppressive social order such as ours.

### Still no equity

While it is undeniable that these provisions have been one of the protagonists of Indian democracy's success stories, these have also accumulated a fair share of problems and call for immediate policy attention and debate.

Through reservation of seats in political and public institutions of the state, it was thought that the hitherto marginalised groups — which have suffered generations of oppression and humiliation — would, finally, be able to find place in the power sharing and decision-making processes. However, this strategy of removal of disabilities has not translated into an equalisation of life chances for many groups in our heterogeneous society.

### Problems with current policy

There is now a strong demand from those who have not been able to accrue the benefits of reservations from within the marginalised sections, to devise some policy option which may be able to supplement the existing system of reservation.

**THE STUDY  
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The fact that the current system suffers from the “problem of reification” is not just wishful thinking, but a hard fact.

The data released by the Justice G. Rohini Commission’s report on the sub-categorisation of OBCs gives a good synoptic view to understand this. Based on the last five years’ data on appointments in central government jobs and OBC admissions to central higher education institutions, the commission concluded that 97% of central OBC quota benefits go to just under 25% of its castes. As many as 983 OBC communities — 37% of the total — have zero representation in both central government jobs and admissions to central universities. Also, the report states that just 10% of the OBC communities have accrued 24.95% of jobs and admissions.

Clearly, the assumption that the disadvantages of every sub-group within each category are the same is severely misplaced.

It is important to note that the Rohini Commission’s data are based just on the institutions that come under the purview of the central government. We hardly have any legible data on the socio-economic conditions of varied social groups at more local levels of State and society.

Consequently, asymmetrical distribution of reservation has severely deterred political projects of unified subaltern solidarity. Parties that were once able to build large Bahujan solidarities are now finding it difficult to garner such support. This should give us hints about the extent of the problem rather than ruling them out as mere conspiracies of breaking lower caste unity.

#### Insufficiency of data

As underlined above, there is a dire need of accurate data pertaining to the socio-economic condition of different social groups. Though caste-based reservations have been pivotal in animating upward social mobility and led to the emergence of a handful of politically mature and visible Dalit-Bahujan castes, we hardly have sufficient data about the actual reach and access of this policy measure.

We do not know what liberalisation has done to castes which remained tied to more traditional sources of income and were incapable of realising the new opportunities provided by the opening of the economy. We do not know how these groups have navigated and transitioned to a more accentuated regime of capital amidst nearly no social security net on the ground. The marginal majority within still dwells in the waiting room of history, waiting to see the light of the policy grid of the state.

#### Affirmative action

What is urgently required is a mechanism that can address this lacuna and make the system more accountable and sensitive to intra-group demands. Since every further categorisation will only lead to reification and fragmentation in the long run, two things are required.

One, we urgently need to develop a wide variety of context-sensitive, evidence-based policy options that can be tailored to meet specific requirements of specific groups. Two, we need an institution like the Equal Opportunities Commission of the United States or the United Kingdom which can undertake two important but interrelated things: make a deprivation index correlating data from the socio-economic-based census of different communities

including caste, gender, religion, and other group inequalities and rank them to make tailor made policies. And, undertake an audit on performance of employers and educational institutions on non-discrimination and equal opportunity and issue codes of good practice in different sectors. This will make the formulation of policy and its monitoring simpler at an institutional level.

As evident, a socio-economic caste-based census becomes a necessary precondition to initiate any meaningful reform in the affirmative action regime in India.

It is worth noting that similar suggestions were made a decade ago in the recommendations that the expert committee for an Equal Opportunities Commission (2008) made in its comprehensive report that it submitted to the Ministry of Minority Affairs. However, little policy progress has been made in this regard. Successive governments have been reluctant to engage with such radical policy options, almost always caving in to immediate and myopic political gains.

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