

OBC Reservations in Higher Education

Are They Worth All the Turmoil?

The “other backward classes” were never subject to the kind of discrimination and the practice of social ostracism that SCs and STs were subject to. Also, the OBCs are already somewhat adequately represented in the Indian Institutes of Management and the universities.

SEBASTIAN MORRIS

Reservations for other backward classes (OBCs) are being sought on the ground of their social and educational backwardness. Reservations for scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) were also justified on this ground, but social discrimination (historical and vestigial) against them was the crucial factor. But SC/ST reservations have not worked at the elite institutional level. Even today, SCs and STs constitute barely 7-8 per cent of the applicants to the common admission test of the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). Exceptions apart, there are notable differences between the grades obtained, as also the placement of such students. In my own courses at IIM Ahmedabad, I have noted a consistent two sigma or more difference between the performance of SC/ST and other candidates. Attendant economic, social and especially earlier-level educational factors continue to be adverse for SCs and STs, despite over 50 years of reservations. Major programmes like land reform and compulsory primary (and secondary education), which could have overcome the endowments problem, were not pursued.

In the case of OBCs there never was the kind of discrimination and practice of social ostracism that SCs and STs were subject to. SC/ST reservations helped create a middle class among these communities who were otherwise represented only at the bottom of the Indian social and economic hierarchy. In this respect, SC/ST reservations have no doubt succeeded. But even here, the middle class among SCs and STs is thin and a policy without reference to the creamy layer needs to continue even if there are far better options of affirmative action available. In the case of SCs and STs, class meant caste, and using caste as a surrogate in affirmative action was justified. Reservations, despite their inefficiency, were also therefore

justified. The issue with regard to OBCs cannot be either social discrimination or ostracism, or economic discrimination, or the argument of the creation of a middle class, since the OBCs, as a group, are well represented in business and in higher education, and they are part of the Indian middle class. Also, there is tremendous upward mobility taking place within many of the jatis that are included among OBCs. The pace of educational and economic progress among some OBCs is so rapid that the criteria of backwardness would not apply in a real functional sense.

So the “class equals caste” statement would be quite invalid in the case of OBCs generally. While in the case of a particular jati of a region it could be true, there is no basis to say that irrespective of region, OBCs constitute an educationally, socially or economically backward class. Upward mobility among OBCs in certain regions has been rapid and this is most notably correlated with the provision of public services, economic development of the region, the prior existence of non-brahmin movements (as happened over much of the south), effectiveness of land reforms, local agricultural development, activities of missionaries, etc. While upward mobility is also correlated with reservations for OBCs, as in some states in the south, these other factors are dominant and determining. Pro-reservationists though would point to the south as success stories of reservation in higher education, ignoring the self-help and community reform character of non-brahmin movements, the higher value that such reforming communities and reform leaders placed on education and the “sanskritisation” that these movements entailed, even when antagonistic to brahmins. They would also not give credence to the better economic performance of these states, and to their relatively better performance in the provision of public services, including education. Such transforming communities witnessed a vast expansion

in community efforts to promote learning. Take, for instance, the innumerable “colleges of engineering” promoted by Muslims in Kerala, and the massive institution building of the SNDP movement of the ezhavas of Kerala.

The point we are emphasising is that unlike in the case of brahmins who could irrespective of region be categorised as educationally forward, and SCs/STs who irrespective of region can be categorised as socially, educationally and economically backward, nothing firm can be said about the OBCs. So an OBC jati, for example, the ezhavas from Kerala, could be educationally and economically more advanced than perhaps many upper caste jatis in the northern region. “Operationalisation” of OBC reservations across states for central government facilities will thus suffer from an additional infirmity over “operationalisation” of the same within a state or a small region. And, if advanced OBC jatis who have made much progress were kept out, then there would be discrimination against a region or state precisely because it has made progress (due in significant measure to better governance, performance of the educational system, and to social movements) and this can foment regional disputes.

Are OBCs already adequately represented in higher education? It is most likely that already more than 20 per cent of the students in the IIMs are from the OBC communities. So given the ceiling of 50 per cent (assuming that the anomaly between this ruling of the Supreme Court and another one that enjoins institutions/organisations to ex-post push such reserved category candidates who qualify under open category to the open category, is removed), the additional “gain” is going to be only 7 per cent or less. The evidence is strong that OBCs are already adequately (to the extent of 25 per cent in rural and 15 per cent in urban areas) represented in Indian universities. So even if one keeps aside all arguments against reservations, this aspect raises the issue: Is it worth it? Can a nation be divided and the idea of equality under the law be systematically violated to “overcome” a non-problem? Also, if the “progressive” OBCs are kept out, the problem of quality deterioration would be severe in leading institutions, since “non-progressive” OBCs (and others in rural areas) being subject to deprivation earlier on would not be able to cope up or gain much out of the “access” created by reservation. ■■

Email: morris@iimahd.ernet.in