

Rethinking Reservation Policy: The Case of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in Orissa

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To cite this article

Balgovind Baboo. Rethinking Reservation Policy: The Case of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in Orissa. *American Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 5, No. 4, 2017, pp. 26-29.

Received: May 15, 2017; **Accepted:** June 2, 2017; **Published:** August 31, 2017

Abstract

The system of protective discrimination or the reservation policy, for some neglected sections of the Indian Society, better known as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, has been in vogue ever since India became a Federal Republic. Since then these groups of people have been enjoying several rights and privileges not available to other normal citizens in India. It is felt that even after six decades these people have not come up as a group (exceptions are there) in the social ladder. On the other hand, people from other caste groups, meritorious and deserving ones have been feeling deprived as they do not get the special benefits of representation, subsidies, scholarship, employment opportunity, housing and others. They feel that the SCs and the STs have wasted, rather misused the opportunities that they did not deserve. This might lead to social conflict and divide the society which is already being capitalized by the political parties.

Keywords

Reservation, Protection, Discrimination, Meritocracy, Mediocracy

1. Introduction

The discourse on reservation has been a hotly debated one in various segments of the Indian population. Rising population and shrinking job market along with political leverage has made this issue a lively one sometimes escalating from an intellectual level to an emotional plane. It is our contention that in a fast changing society policies and programmes enunciated by the government must be re-examined periodically as these are historical and context specific. The issue of reservation is no exception.

This paper examines the implications of reservation policy for the Scheduled Castes (henceforth SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (henceforth STs) together in Orissa as we strongly believe that even though there are substantial differences among the SCs and the STs in relation to reservation, they cannot be really separated from each other. The basic differences lie in their size, habitat, occupation and cultural practices. There are about 751 groups of SCs constituting about 15% of the Indian population as opposed to about 635

groups of STs constituting about 8% of the population. In case of Orissa there are 93 SC groups accounting for 16.53% of the state's population as also 3.65% of the Indian SC population. Similarly there are 62 tribal communities including 13 primitive tribes accounting for 22.01% of the state and 9.7% of the total Indian tribal population. Whereas the SCs are concentrated in the eight coastal districts, the STs are concentrated in the North-western and Southern parts of Orissa. The STs are concentrated more/near the forests and periphery whereas the SCs usually habitat in the plains. The SCs are dominated by the cultural practices of the Hindus but the STs are not always so especially in terms of purity/pollution and religious conversion. The STs basically depend on forest and related activities but the SCs depend on settled agriculture and varieties of other occupations in rural and urban areas. The SCs are physically more mobile and would not mind migrating during necessities but the STs are less mobile, would prefer shifting cultivation but not move out of their native territory. Both these groups have been considered undeveloped, poor and illiterate before the arrival of the British and some of the SC groups were considered

untouchables. Missionary activities in the Northeast of India helped some Mongoloid tribes to be English educated and more self-ruled. This paper basically draws experience from Sambalpur, Bargarh, Kalahandi and Sundergarh districts in Orissa. Before dealing with the contemporary situation in Orissa it might not be out of place to look into the historical background that has led to the present social formation.

2. The Historical Backdrops

The study area, i.e. Sambalpur district in Orissa state became a unified district only in Oct. 1949 before which its constituent parts were part of the South West Frontier (1849-1860), Orissa Division of Bengal (1860-1862), the Central Provinces (1862-1905), the Orissa Division of the Province of Bengal (1905-1912), and again the Central Provinces (1912-1936) and became a district of Orissa only in 1936 when Orissa became a separate state. The British policies on land, industry, trade and tariff, and the 'general welfare' of the society were crucial to then society, and more so in the economic arena. The traditional pattern of social stratification in terms of ascriptive caste norms was hardly disturbed during colonial times both in the peasant and urban/industrial sectors of India. So the general condition of SCs and STs did not undergo much change; it did not improve at all. The STs were further pushed to the hills and the hinterlands because of the specific revenue policy of the British. The British tenurial system created within the SCs and STs an intermediary class of landlords in the form of village headman or *Pradhans*, *Chaukidars*, *Jhankars*, *Gauntias* and *Zamindars*. They enjoyed rent free land and other economic benefits and privileges. They usually had the best land in the village in terms of location and fertility. They also acted as liaison men between the outsiders – government agencies, traders, money-lenders, rent collectors, etc. – and the local people and enhanced their socio-economic positions because of the special privileges bestowed on them by the Colonial governance. They were also important in terms of decision making in the villages.

3. The Field and the Method

We have followed a diachronic rather than a synchronic approach and tried to understand the deprivation and prosperity of the SCs and STs as it evolved historically. We have tried to explain why despite the best intention of the government the formal legislations and the special provisions could not uniformly be implemented efficiently for the development of the SCs and the STs. For larger generalization we selected six different types of villages of erstwhile Sambalpur district taking one irrigated (wet) and one non-irrigated (dry) village from three sectors: tribal, peasant and suburban. For the purpose of brevity we name these as Tribal Dry Village (TDV), Tribal Wet Village (TWV), Peasant Dry Village (PDV), Peasant Wet Village (PWV), Suburban Dry Village (SDV) and Suburban Wet Village (SWV).

4. The Contemporary Situation

After independence formal legislations, industrial urbanization and agricultural modernization have changed substantially the rural scenario in Sambalpur at least cosmetically. The Five Year Plans of government of India and Orissa and later intervention of several target group-oriented schemes were meant to ameliorate the condition of these disadvantageous groups. However, the policy makers did not try to understand the difference between these two groups, nor did they understand the rigidity of their culture and social structure and the particular contexts/regions where they were located in Orissa.

In independent India these were the people who have been offered maximum benefits from the developmental programmes. Because of the initial access to and control over land and other resources the intermediaries among the SCs and the STs, who were a creation of the colonial times, have become well off and educated. These are the people who have got maximum benefit from the protective discrimination policy of the government of India. People in and around the centre/cities got more than people in the periphery because of the difference in the opportunity structures. People in the irrigated zones got more benefit than people in the non-irrigated zones. Similarly people in the SWV got the maximum benefit whereas people in the TDV were in the opposite end of the scale. It shows that over a period of time an embryonic form of class formation has taken shape within a particular tribal group/village which was usually a homogeneous community without any division of labour and stratification [3, 6, 12]. On the other hand, the tribals are a heterogeneous category in terms of their size, distribution, levels of education and overall development. Tribals in the north-east of India, especially Nagas and Mizos, the Meenas of Rajasthan and the Raj-Gond and Santhals in central India are probably more privileged compared to other tribes although inequality is there within these tribes, e.g., the Ao Nagas are more educated as compared to the Konyaks. Impact of Missionaries in the form of English education, health and some pecuniary gains on the one hand and the geo-strategic location in the form of forest and mineral resources and location in sensitive area has helped some tribals to be economically and socially mobile. Problems have arisen when these converted tribals have taken the major chunk of reservation benefits as in the case of Sundergarh district of Orissa. There is also inequality between the tribes in terms of their major source of living, i.e., nomadic grazing, hunting, food gathering, settled agriculture and industrial-urban activities [6].

It is our contention that the reservation policy has helped the tribals differently. It also means that there is intra-tribal and inter-tribal differences which hinder the process of collective mobilization of the tribals for the long term gains. The effort of the government to integrate the tribals with the mainstream through de-isolationisation and modernization of their tradition [10] and through protective discrimination has helped the privileged section of the community and helped

for individual social mobility rather than collective mobility [9].

The implication of reservation policy is a little different for the SCs. They, unlike the STs, usually remain in the multi-caste peasant sector and are ranked low in the ritual hierarchy. The prescriptive and proscriptive norms in terms of purity-pollution, division of labour and marital rules put them in a disadvantageous position and some SCs are considered untouchable. Their ownership of resources is also usually low. So unlike the tribals they suffer from cumulative inequality. The categorization of some sub-castes in the SCs fold as also in the Other Backward Castes (OBC) fold, as per the Mandal Commission Report, seems to be arbitrary as per our experience in Orissa. The *Keuts* (confectioner and fisherman) were given the status of the SC whereas the poor and lowly placed *Bhandari* (barbers) and *Dhuba* (washermen) were given the OBC status much later. Similarly the relatively well-off *Agrias*, *Telis*, *Dumbals*, etc have been categorized in the OBC. The *Agrias*, *Kultas* and *Chasas* are industrious agriculturalists, ranked next only to Brahmins and are also educated. They might be called the dominant caste in some areas. It seems political consideration rather than other criteria have been used for such classification [5].

However, within the SCs the several sub-castes are not at equal level of development and there is a feeling of mutual antagonism and inferior/superior position. Their differences in education, land ownership, numerical strength and political participation are also different. The prescribed occupational differences necessarily lead to economic inequality and more so in the recent times as some occupations become almost unremunerative in the context of agricultural modernization. Besides the intra-caste and inter-caste disparities among the SCs, the elites among the SCs are not really acting as reference groups for the masses because they themselves are dependent on the mainstream elite and upper caste groups for their political survival as they act more as 'power reservoirs' rather than 'power exercisers' [4, 11].

Since the different sub-castes among the SCs have different access and control over resources and inequality is inbuilt in the system their chance of getting the reservation benefits/facilities of the government also varies significantly. However, it would be fallacious to say that the lower the ritual status of a sub-caste (within the SCs) the higher its exploitation liabilities and vice-versa. At a micro-level, say in a locality, the numerical strength of the untouchable sub-caste would be inversely related with economic prosperity if there is little modernization of their services/occupation [1].

Table -1 shows that during 1961-2011 the percentage of SCs and STs to the total population has gradually declined but their percentage of literacy has increased although the same is less than that of Sambalpur district and Orissa. The position of the SCs is still better than the STs. In 1991 there has been a change of definition (below seven years are not included). The figures during the period 1991-2011 also seem to be inflated as the government does not want to cut a sorry figure in terms of its effort and achievement. However,

despite so much encouragement by the State the representation of the population in formal sector is very low.

5. The Supporting Views

The following statements by three distinguished social scientists give us some direction and food for thought. B. K. Roy-Burman (1977:88) observes that "Reservation in the services also seem to have yielded diminishing returns to the untouchable castes... there should also be rethinking on the actual impact of reservation in educational institutions and in the legislations and of the special schemes of benefits to the Scheduled Castes" [8]. E. A. Ramaswamy (1986:399) says "while on the one hand, protectionism attempts to moderate the inequality between the scheduled castes and the rest, on the other hand, it has engendered inequality among the scheduled castes themselves. The exploitation of benefits by some sections of these castes has pushed to the fore the differences rather than the uniformities among them" [7]. Andre Beteille (1981:99) underlines "in destroying old inequalities we do not create new ones. Discrimination is a dangerous instrument, no matter how pure the intentions are of those who use it and how careful we have to be in using even for a desirable end" [2].

6. Conclusions

This paper basically draws from our experience of long field work in different types of villages (tribal, peasant and suburban as well as wet and dry) in western Orissa. The British people did not touch much of the core institutional order of the SCs and STs; so they did not change much. But the British revenue policy as also the policy on forest and liquor created an intermediary well off class among them and marginalised most of them. Further, the intra-group and inter group difference among the SCs and STs did not allow them to capitalize on the positive benefits from formal legislations, agricultural modernization and industrial urbanization. The SCs suffered from cumulative inequality; the STs from social isolation but the privileged amongst them moved ahead on the political and economic ladder but hardly acted as the reference group for their fellow beings. The collaboration and collusion of the well offs with the dominant castes and the powers-that-be has been the order of the day so much so that the very purpose of protective discrimination gets defeated. On the other hand, the affluent castes like the *Brahmins* and the *Kultas* have resented against the reservation policy as the SCs (especially *Ganda*, *Pana* and *Dom*) in many villages have become violent and as they are given the benefits of surplus land, financial packages and opportunities in new enterprises/schemes and education whereas the industrious and miserly *Kultas* suffering from risk and uncertainties in agriculture are not given such concessions. It is our contention that reservation policy amongst the SCs and STs has not differentiated inequality; rather it has perpetuated inequality within these groups as was the case of Community development programme in India. This is because the

government is trying to see contest mobility in a sponsored society or see equal cultural capital in a society of unequal structural capital. It is probably time now to re-examine whether the Reservation Policy should be extended/ modified

in the context of Dalit movements on the one hand and rising dissatisfaction among the other castes on the other resulting in caste conflicts and atrocities.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the SCs and the STs in Orissa.

Sl. No.	Year	% of SC to Total	% of ST to Total	% of SC&ST to Total	Orissa % of Literate and Educated	% of SC Literacy	% of ST Literacy	% of General Literacy in Sambalpur
1	1961	15.75	24.07	39.82	21.67	11.60	7.40	22.94
2	1971	15.09	23.11	38.20	26.18	15.61	9.50	27.12
3	1981	14.68	22.41	37.09	34.23	22.41	13.96	33.83
4	1991	14.66	22.43	37.09	49.08	36.77	18.10	49.38
5	2001	16.5	22.1	38.6	63.1	55.53	37.4	67.30
6	2011	17.1	22.8	39.9	72.87	69.02	52.24	76.20

Source: Govt. of Orissa, Census of Orissa for respective years.

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