



# Getting out of the quota quagmire

How to limit the expansion of group-targeting while ensuring that disadvantaged groups get the help they need

As headline after headline on reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Muslims is blazoned on the front pages, I wonder if we are not like Abhimanyu: we were told how to get into the *Chakravayuh* but were never taught how to get out of it. Let us collectively pause for a moment and reflect on what social justice means and how best to achieve it.

After more than 60 years of positive discrimination in one form or another, what is the status of social inequality in India? Several empirical observations are noteworthy.

First, we know that the forward castes feel resentful of purportedly undeserving lower castes pushing them out and engaging in reverse discrimination. However, this is more a matter of perception than reality. Almost all statistics continue to document that the forward castes get higher education, greater incomes and better material resources than Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Second, we have seen some success in our past reservations, in that the proportion of Dalits and Adivasis pursuing higher education as well as occupying various levels of government jobs has increased. However, this has been a limited success, and a vast gap persists between Dalits and Adivasis on the one hand and the forward castes on the other. Childhood disadvantages of being born in poor families are compounded by social prejudices and discrimination.

Third, newer claimants to underdog status, like Muslims and OBCs, have a reasonable case to make. When compared to the forward castes, OBCs as a whole are poorer and less educated. Muslims are on a par

with OBCs when it comes to income; but they are substantially behind in education, in the same category as Dalits and Adivasis. Thus, there is an urgent need to focus on educational achievement among Muslims.

Fourth, once we start thinking in terms of policies that deliver social justice, there are very few arrows in the government's quiver. A broad demographic examination is enough to open our eyes. While we don't

have very good estimates of the relative size of various groups, a combination of National Sample Survey and Census data suggests the following proportions: Scheduled Castes (16 per cent), Scheduled Tribes (eight per cent), Hindu OBCs (33 per cent), and Muslim OBCs (five per cent). So, in effect, about 60 per cent of the population deserves some special consideration. I would personally add the eight per cent of non-OBC Muslims among this, given the murkiness of OBC classification for Muslims and low educational attainment of all Muslims. No policy can effectively

help all of these claimants – adding up to nearly 70 per cent of the total population – and must choose the most vulnerable within this group.

Fifth, our politicians – arguably some of the most street-smart operators in the world – have realised both the powers and the dangers of the rhetoric of relative deprivation. So they are happy to advocate specific benefits for specific groups as and when it is opportunistic even as they, in effect, ensure that such a vast proportion of India's population is eligible for compensatory justice that the whole exercise becomes meaningless. The range of special programmes that have been undertaken provides great opportunities for corruption and leakage. Even as we recognise the



SONALDE DESAI

complex political reality of hundreds of government programmes for the weaker sections of society, it is time to start thinking with a long-term horizon.

How can we get out of this *Chakravayuh*? For that, we will have to give up on the myriad schemes for different social groups that have been introduced by the Centre as well as state governments and focus on a limited number of key long-term objectives. Three aspects deserve attention.

**Opportunity:** Some social groups have been handicapped by historical injustices and circumstances. Hence, reservations in colleges and government jobs to provide compensatory justice and ensure social mobility are a good idea. But reservations should be administered in such a way that a constant churn in social position is ensured and benefits are only available for upward movement, and not for children trying to cling to their parents' status. College reservations should be restricted to students whose parents have not completed college. Job reservation for Class-C employees should only be used by individuals whose parents were not government employees or did not progress beyond Class-D jobs and so on. This would allow a much larger segment of the population to have a shot at social mobility without worrying about sub quotas. Two simple criteria, parental education and class of government service, will be much easier to implement than complex rules about "the creamy layer". We should also set a date far in the future, perhaps in 2047, when these reservations would end. As a result, any future government will have the option to either let these reservations lapse without huge political costs or restructure them in response to the needs of the time that might not have been anticipated at Independence.

**Equality:** Promotions in the government sector and jobs in the private sector should be governed by non-discrimination, rather than reservations, along the lines of equal opportunity programmes implemented by other countries, including the United States. This would require the hiring authorities to maintain records that would allow any candidate who was denied opportunity for hiring or advancement to challenge the employer to show that they do not systematically discriminate against certain groups of applicants, without focusing on individual grievances.

**Safety nets:** Though it is important to recognise that the broad occupational and social background nexus of Indian society has led to poverty and vulnerability among Dalits and Adivasis and, to some extent, among OBCs and Muslims, the solutions should be universal. When setting up food subsidy programmes, it makes little sense to distinguish between the hunger of a Rajput and that of a Valmiki. Safety-net policies must be blind to social origins and should, instead, focus on programmes that make good sense. Instead of relying on social group membership, safety-net policies should try smarter strategies to identify the poorest. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is a good example of a universal programme that contains natural targeting – no one with money wants to do back-breaking work.

The problem with our current public policies is that instead of having a clearly articulated strategy, we have tried to do everything with too few resources. How about simply focusing on a 35-year horizon to level the playing field? Otherwise, we run the risk of never getting out of this *Chakravayuh*.