

## Anti-Reservation Protest: Shoring Up Privilege

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While in neighbouring Nepal an unrelenting democratic movement spearheaded by the country’s youth – most of them students – has brought an anachronistic and repressive monarchy to the knees, setting in motion the founding of a republic, the upper caste metropolitan medical graduates in India’s state-run or aided institutions are out on the streets protesting the government’s intention to implement 27 per cent reservation for India’s other backward classes in institutions of higher learning. It is of no concern to them that such reservations have the sanction of the Indian Constitution and of Parliament.

### Youth for Equality?

The current protests are being held under the banner “youth for equality”. What the protesters really desire, though, is not equality but a continuance of entrenched social privilege cloaked as “merit”, and a denial of equality to the communities that comprise some 80 per cent of India’s population. Shamelessly enough, these beneficiaries of India’s inequitable social order emblemise their impending doom by carrying brooms in hand, connoting their threatened descent to the lowest order of street-sweepers. The irony escapes them that their so-called pursuit of “equality” ought in fact to enjoin that they took time out to do some real-time sweeping, just to feel how “those others” feel. As well as to live in the hinterland or among urban slums in order to experience how life without clout, very next to islands of obscene prosperity, both deadens and angers the soul. Such an experience would

also bring home with a thud how “merit” is more often than not a mere social construct and a function of the arrangement and control of both physical resources, including nutrition, and enabling institutional practices.

On raucous television shows these days, these elite protesters exhibit their high merit by answering substantial questions of fact and history with shrieks and howls – a cultural attribute they routinely ascribe to the backwards. For example, they simply drown out the terse truth that those among them who routinely obtain admission to medical colleges despite forgettably abysmal percentages at school-leaving examinations as quid pro quo to hefty capitation moneys are, indeed, beneficiaries of a system of reservations available only to the imbecile rich. That such a practice has never occasioned protest among them goes without saying. Likewise, they have never taken to the streets to push the state to enhance its total allocation to education (which now, 60 years after independence, stays at a miserable 3.5 per cent – one of the lowest even in the developing world, whereas the prestigious Kothari Commission had stipulated a minimum of 6 per cent as far back as 1966). Nor are they persuaded that the simple measure of increasing the total number of seats to institutions of specialised learning could sort out the problem, if only a sustained movement was conducted on the issue. When the state makes mandatory provisions of employment for India’s relegated social groups, our metropolitan mascots argue that the right thing is to make educational opportunities available to these groups. And, when the state does precisely that, up goes the cry that India is going to sink

to the depths of oblivion. Nor will they answer the question as to why it is that despite six decades of upper caste hegemony in all professional and administrative sectors, all full of merit, the country remains at number 127 on the world’s human development index, cannot provide drinking water to more than half its citizens, leaves an equal number in the dark without electricity, rural infrastructure, healthcare or basic education. The simple and unedifying fact is that unlike educated youth elsewhere – in France just recently they led a movement as redolent as the one in 1968 to defeat the conservative government’s market-friendly policy to allow companies to “hire and fire” employees between the ages of 18 and 26 – India’s parasitical metropolitans reserve their primary concern for themselves. That even self-interest should be socially enlightened is not a thesis they buy. Often accusing, through snide and snigger, the backwards of being lawless, uncouth (because of negligible proficiency in English) and violent, these English-speaking beneficiaries of India’s glaringly inequitable “development” think nothing of flying lawlessly, uncouthly and violently in the face of the Constitution and the Parliament at the least hint of any curtailment to the privilege they are born into.

In barely-concealed class empathy with these warriors in defence of privilege, the bulk of India’s “mainstream” print and electronic media carry daily doses of saturation coverage of their meritorious exploits. The same media that under normal circumstances berates doctors for declaring strike action, carrying repeated and heart-wrenching visuals of poor patients languishing on pavements, today project these striking medicos as the wounded vanguards of the nation’s future. Often, again, highly deferential to the pronouncements of India’s Supreme Court as the noble corrective to national political aberrations, this same media remains silent on the fact that this same Supreme Court allows the state to institute reservations up to 50 per cent. It is to be noted that such a provision, even if dutifully implemented, still leaves the rest of the 50 per cent available to some 20 per cent of the population. But, of course, the parasitical

elite want all, failing which they promptly forget about “national well-being” and the need for merit and seek for avenues either in the new world or in old Britain. Or, worst come to worst, in some lucrative Arab land.

### North Indian Phenomenon

Another thing. The current protest against reservations is almost wholly a north-Indian phenomenon with no resonance in the southern states. And for a reason. In the southern states, thanks to memorable people’s movements during the early years of the 20th century, reservations have been in place since 1920. The result: the vast majority of the meritorious professionals in the southern states come from backward communities, including in the best medical institutions. And, by common consent, the southern states also happen to be some of India’s best administered regions. But, if you thought these historical facts would make a dent in the breast-beating about the prospects of damage to merit among our northern knights, think again. History does not matter, and they do not read anyway, except, of course, the occasional latest best-seller.

Occasionally, one or two among these upper caste galahads declare that they are all for socially enabling state action, but so long as the benefits thereof do not go to the “creamy layer” among the backwards. The thought that they themselves are the creamy progeny of a creamy layer that has millennia of social and cultural history to it, and consequent economic appropriation as well, does not occur to them. Remember now that the upper castes were anyway ordained by the god of gods to rule, since they issued out of Brahma’s head and shoulders, leaving the low castes to crawl out of his feet and lower limbs to do them service.

Furthermore, in tune with the worldwide depoliticisation of elites in the wake of the Washington Consensus and the apparently ideology-neutral market-mantra, our youthful protesters raise the cry that the government means to pursue vote-bank politics. The natural assumption here is that policies that enhance the interests of the top 20 per cent are ipso facto in the national interest, whereas policies that address centuries of inequity among the dispossessed are grossly political and ideological. Does it matter that democracies are democracies precisely because they are meant to respond to the needs and aspirations of the widest spectrum of

citizens, in order that the republican ideals of “equality and fraternity” are realised. It does not; it is a dangerously ugly fact that the current protests are unleashed by segments who have little care for democratic principles, and are routinely contemptuous of its slow processes and grinds. Give them a strongman who would guarantee their prosperous isolation and keep them safe from the rabble, and they will junk both the Constitution and the Parliament without a second thought. It is hardly surprising that while India’s poor millions trudge religiously to cast their vote, these meritorious scions of India’s world-power aspirations vote but in tiny dribbles. And, for good reason: it hardly matters which centrist (read “reformist”) party comes to power so long as it does. Their entrenched clout makes it possible to get any job done, often over the phone. So where is the need to suffer the discomfort and the socially levelling effects of standing in line at the booth? The propensities of this class are best represented by a thing called “the knowledge commission”. Although just an advisory body of some seven or nine technicians, with two honourable exceptions, and no statutory standing, it took upon itself the other day to pronounce its opposition to the proposed reservations as a bad idea for globalising India. Deriding political interference in India’s global advance, it chose to make one of the most grossly unctuous political interventions without the least locus standi in the context. But the prompt rebuff it has received from the minister-in-charge of educational policy-making must go down as a high point of democratic corrective: if the knowledge commission is so ignorant of India’s Constitution, the minister said, it has rather small reason to call itself a knowledge commission. Well said indeed.

### Disingenuous Argument

When expedient times arrive, upper caste elites make another disingenuous argument. They allege that such policies as instituting reservations on social considerations threaten to “divide” India. The inescapable historical fact that the division they speak of has been the consequence of millennia of institutionalised social apartheid within the Hindu community, sanctioned by them and by the scriptures they follow either escapes them altogether (since most read or reflect but little anyway), or is held up as something divinely ordained. The casteism of the upper castes is simply

regarded as the operation of “nature”; but, hang on, when the lower castes seek to further their unity of purpose, breast-beating about “casteism” rends the elite stratosphere. Nor does it seem odd that these naturals advertise everyday in the national dailies for matrimonial alliances purely and explicitly along the axis of caste affinity! When did we say that merit needs to be grounded in the least capacity to think, or then to think honestly.

In the current agitation one of the chief allies of the marauding medicos is, of course, India’s business class. Suddenly, these manufacturers of private profit are riven with anxiety that a dispensation of reservations will not but spell doom for their global competitiveness. You, well, might wonder look who is talking. These captains of industry were, of course, the beneficiaries of the most ruthless protectionism kept in place by a friendly state till four decades or more after independence. That was the time when their chief demand was that foreign competition must be kept out till their indigenous capacities had properly matured. Nor do they seem to recall that for all those decades they were also the beneficiaries of core raw materials (oil, coal, steel, cement) at subsidised rates through the munificence of India’s much-maligned “public sector”. How times change. What never changes is the ability of India’s vested classes to invent arguments that shore up their privilege and keep out the underdog.

Equally obvious, however, should be the fact that, the days for such brazenly self-serving privilege to succeed seem nearing the end. Indian democracy over the last six decades has, however, grudgingly or lugubriously, released a historical dynamic which is not about to be turned back by barefaced assertion alone. That is a fat thought that they could well ponder, if nothing else. [E.P.W.]

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