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Political Dynamics of OBC Reservation: A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT :

This research analyses the complex politics of Other Backward Class (OBC) reservations in India, focusing on their historical context, social mobility impact, and political significance. It traces the evolution of OBC reservations from pre-independence princely states to post-independence commissions like Kaka Kalelkar and Mandal, which recommended a 27% quota in government jobs and education. The study highlights social mobility movements that influenced reservation policies, noting that while these policies offer opportunities, addressing deep-rooted socio-cultural issues is essential for lasting impact. Politically, OBC reservations have democratised politics, challenging upper-caste dominance, as seen in the 1990s "silent revolution" and the rise of the BJP among lower OBCs. The research also discusses the contentious caste census issue, advocating for robust data to guide policies and acknowledging potential implications on reservation allocations and social dynamics. It concludes by emphasizing the complex interplay between vote bank politics and OBC reservations, recognizing both sincere efforts to address inequalities and concerns about political exploitation. The study underscores the need for a nuanced strategy to balance social justice with effectiveness and fairness, as OBC reservation politics continue to shape India's pursuit of inclusivity and equality.

Keywords: OBC reservation, caste census, vote bank politics, social justice, inclusivity.

Introduction:

India has been implementing abroad-based reservation policy for over 75 years, as required by the constitution. In India, reservations are the most divisive topic. As a corrective remedy for the modern disabilities that people experience as a result of past discrimination and severe stigmatisation because of their deprived position, reservation for the most oppressed groups was conceived as a policy of compensatory discrimination. There is no denying that these reservation policies have strengthened Indian democracy and are generally supported by the population. In India, the politics of reservation are an intricate and deep lying rained feature of the nation's socio- political environment, influenced by past injustices, affirmative action policies, and current discussions regarding social justice. One important tool for overcoming historical community marginalisation and promoting inclusivity has been the concept of reservation. The word "reservation" refers to set-aside quotas or affirmative action policies that allot a particular proportion of seats in government positions, educational institutions, and other public domains to particular groups, frequently on the basis of caste, tribe, or other factors. Reservation aimed at addressing the historical discrimination and inequalities faced by marginalised communities. The reservation system gives marginalized people greater access to government jobs, educational Opportunities and other resources in an effort to advance social justice and uplift the under privileged groups.

In India, the politics of reservation and other backward classes are intricate and dynamic aspects of the country's socio-political environment, characterized by historical discrimination, affirmative action, and continuous discussions about social justice. Mainly, the reservation policy targeted groups are the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which together constitute the three weaker segments of Indian society. The Indian Constitution grants special privileges to "other socially and educationally backward classes," in addition to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. There is uncertainty over the identity of these groups, the process for choosing them, and the actions the government may take on their behalf. Reservations were initially only allowed for the SCs and STs by the central government in 1950, but they were later expanded to include OBCs in higher education and public jobs. However, the reservation of Other Backward Class was contentious, due to the issues with categorizing the lower classes, as well as caste and class differences within larger groups. In contrast, the reservations for the SC's and ST's have been a cognize aspect of government policy since Independence. OBC reservations are founded on a combination of socioeconomic disadvantage and caste-related prejudice against the OBC population. As a result, even though OBCs are officially referred to as other backward "classes," people frequently mistake them for other backward "castes."

In the Indian social hierarchy, the OBCs are a caste that comes in above the Untouchables unless below the forward and intermediate castes (who are primarily composed of peasant proprietors and even dominant castes). Approximately 50% of Indians are OBCs, who typically labour as artisans or field workers. Despite this, they have historically held subaltern positions. This essay looks at reservation practices, concentrating on OBC reservations in particular. It talks about the development and effects of these policies and how they have impacted the democratisation of politics. This research is the nexus of public policy and political processes since Independence and the aim is to include underrepresented groups in public institutions.

Historical Background of OBC Reservation Pre Independence Era

Technically speaking, the term "Backward Classes" originated in the Mysore princely state. The Mysore Government established a committee 1918 to look into the issue of encouraging people from "backward communities" to enter the public service. Preferential hiring of "backward communities"—defined as "all communities other than Brahmins, who are not currently adequately-represented in the public service" was instituted in 1921. Backward Classes were defined as "castes or classes which are educationally backward" in the glossary by the Hartog Committee in 1928. The downtrodden classes are among them. The issue of the "backward classes," which include criminal tribes, native people, and other less developed British Indian citizens, was identified by the Indian Central Committee in 1929. Travancore dropped the term "Depressed Classes" in 1937 and replaced it with "Backward Communities" to refer to all populations that were economically and educationally behind. Nonetheless, the layers above the untouchables were referred to as "Backward Classes" in Madras and other places.

Meanwhile, Jawaharlal Nehru's December 13 1946, Objective Resolution of the Constituent Assembly said that "minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes" should have sufficient safeguards. In several regions of the nation, the phrase "Backward Classes" had become widely used by the time of the Constituent Assembly to describe any sizeable group of people who should be given preferential treatment⁴. Consequently, the phrase had never come to have a clear definition throughout all of India.

Post Independence Era

On January 29, 1953 the First Backward Class Commission was established through a Presidential Order in accordance with Article 340 of the Indian Constitution. This commission, also known as the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, was presided over by Shri Kaka Kalelkar. The commission submitted its report on March 30, 1955. To identify the socially and educationally backward classes, the commission developed several criteria. These included a low social status within the traditional caste hierarchy of Hindu society, a lack of general educational advancement among the majority of the caste or community, insufficient or non-existent representation in Government services and inadequate representation in the fields of trade and commerce. It created a list of 2399 communities and castes that are considered backward across the nation. The Central government rejected this report on the grounds that no objective tests had been used to determine who belonged in the Backward Class. Nevertheless, the government rejected the Kalelkar Commission's recommendations, and a number of reasons led to this decision:

Limited Scope and Approach

The recommendations made by the Kalelkar Commission were criticised for their narrow focus and for failing to adequately address the complexities of caste-based backwardness. Critics argued that the commission did not take into account a wide range of social, economic, and educational characteristics. The commission's primary method of identifying backward classes was based on caste, which drew criticism for maintaining a caste-centric viewpoint and ignoring additional Socio economic factors that contribute to backwardness. Additionally, the proposals of the Kalelkar Commission were rejected for political reasons. The government may have been reluctant to implement policies that could have significant political implications due to potential opposition from influential caste groups. Furthermore, the commission's proposal was seen as overly simplistic, dividing communities into two categories: backward and non-backward. This binary classification was insufficient to capture the dynamic and diverse nature of social backwardness, especially in a country as diverse as India.

Subsequent Commissions

Following the rejection of the Kalelkar Commission's report, subsequent commissions, such as the Mandal Commission in the 1970s, were established to address the issue of backward classes.

These later commissions employed distinct methods and criteria to identify socially and educationally backward classes. Their recommendations received greater recognition and were partially adopted. The rejection of the Kalelkar Commission's report sparked an effort to address the issue of backward classes in a more comprehensive and nuanced manner. Later commissions introduced more inclusive criteria, incorporating socioeconomic considerations, which helped shape the development of affirmative action and reservation policies for India's underprivileged communities.

Mandal Commission

In order to "identify the socially or educationally backward classes" of India, the Janta Party administration led by Prime Minister Morarji Desai formed the Mandal Commission, also known as the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC), in 1979. The group, led by Indian lawmaker B. P. Mandal examined the issue of reservations as a means of addressing caste discrimination and assessed backwardness using eleven social, economic and educational metrics. Members of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) should be granted reservations to 27% of jobs under the Central Government and public sector, according to the commission's 1980 report, which was based on the argument that OBCs ("Other backward classes") identified on the basis of caste, social, and economic indicators made up 52% of population. According to the commission, 3743 distinct castes and groups made up 52% of India's total population (excluding SCs and STs) and were considered "backward." According to the National Commission for Backward Classes, the number of backward castes in the Central list of OBCs climbed to 5,013 in 2006 (excluding the data for the majority of the Union Territories). To determine who was considered a member of the "other backward class," the panel established eleven standards that fell into three main categories: social, educational and economic. Eleven standards were created to determine OBCs.

1. Social

- Classes and castes that other people view as socially backward,

- Castes or groups whose primary source of income is manual labour,
 - castes or classes in which, in rural areas, at least 25% of females and 10% of boys above the state average marry before the age of 17, and in urban areas, at least 10% of females and 5% of males do so.
 - castes or classes in which the proportion of working-age women is at least 25% higher than the state norm
- 2. Educational**
- classes/castes in which there are at least 25% more children in the 5–15 year old age range who have never attended school than the state average.
 - Classes/castes whose percentage of matriculating students is at least 25% lower than the state average
 - Classes whose rate of student dropout in the 5–15 age range is at least 25% higher than the state average
- 3. Economical**
- classes/castes in which family assets' average value is at least 25% less than the state average,
 - castes or classes when the proportion of households residing in kucchadwellings exceeds the state average by at least 25%,
 - Castes and classes where a minimum of 25% more families than the state average have taken out consumption loans
 - Castes and classes where a majority of households obtain their drinking water from sources farther than half a kilometre away.

Social Mobility Movement

Social mobility began before British rule and altered the position of castes within the system, but it did not dismantle the caste system itself. According to M.N. Srinivas, social mobility was more fluid in traditional times as it occurred organically. However, this mobility permitted only positional changes, not structural changes to the caste system. Srinivas attributes the political volatility of the system as one of the reasons for this mobility. Such an environment made the Backward Class movement feasible, unlike the conditions that existed prior to capitalism. These social movements were intertwined with their own set of political and economic connections. Furthermore, they were having an impact on the caste system's actual structure. It's hard to tell how much of an egalitarian component these revolutions had. While it is acknowledged that many members of various castes do not follow their traditional occupations, it is assumed that most people who work in traditional occupations represented in the pre-industrial technological nexus are still members of the castes or ethnic groups that have historically been associated with these occupations. It's critical to understand that social mobility is a complicated, multidimensional process that is impacted by a range of social, historical, economic, and educational variables. Reservation regulations have been helpful in creating possibilities, but for OBCs in India to have meaningful and long-lasting social mobility, it is imperative that other structural and socio cultural issues be addressed.

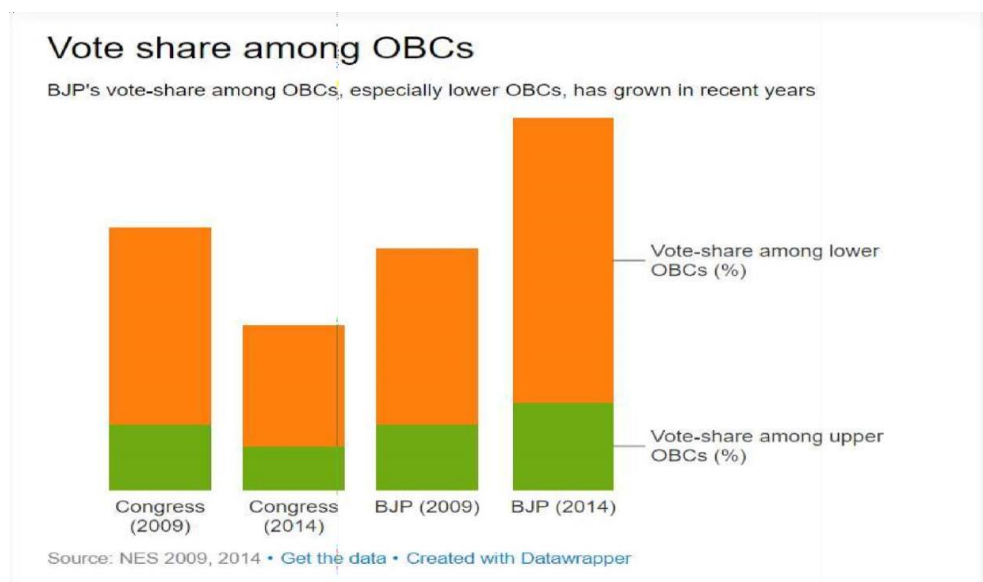
Political Significance of OBC Reservation

The introduction of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) has had a multifaceted impact on the structure of power, political representation, and electoral dynamics. Rather than being the outcome of political mobilization and social movements, the OBC reservation policy emerged from shifting political dynamics. Political opposition to upper caste dominance centred on caste reservations, which, despite upper caste discontent, could no longer be ignored. Reservations have fostered greater democratization and involvement from previously marginalized groups. The democratic uprising of the lower castes challenged the upper castes' hegemony in the legislature and bureaucracy. Indian politics underwent a radical transformation as the OBC reservation policy granted access to previously marginalised caste groups. This phenomenon, which peaked in the 1990s, was termed a "silent revolution" by Christophe Jaffrelot (Jaffrelot 2003). He notes that the Mandal moment was fundamentally political, even if the expansion of positive discrimination was at stake. It was most noticeable in northern India. It led to a change in the proportion of political power held by governments and legislatures, which

Changed the nature of democratic politics and political representation.⁹ This is evident from the significant rise in lower caste legislators and powerful positions in the government starting in the 1990s. Reservations have undoubtedly contributed to the backward castes' political significance by giving them a strong voice in politics that they did not previously have. Due to their involvement in and influence over electoral politics, these castes have gained political strength and could no longer be marginalised (Jaffrelot 2006).

Reservation politics are hot once more, more than 25 years after the Mandal Commission's recommendations for the introduction of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were put into practice in India. Not only are influential middle castes nationwide pushing for reservations, but some politicians have also started to support private sector reservations. In the meantime, an OBC sub-categorization committee has been established by the Narendra Modi-led Union government to guarantee a "more equitable sharing of benefits." The BJP appears to have more support among lower OBCs, according to data from National Election Studies (NES) carried out by the Lokniti research programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in Delhi.

According to the NES statistics, the Congress outperformed the BJP in every election held between 1996 and 2009 in terms of OBC support. In 2014, the BJP managed to take a 19% point lead among OBCs, turning the tables. Among lower OBCs, the BJP had a larger edge over the Congress than among upper OBCs. With the BJP's selection to power, there has been a partial reversal of the upper castes' post-Mandal migration. This is a result of the upper castes' BJP overrepresentation, which has aided in their return to prominence and power. The argument of backward caste has been somewhat undermined by this, but OBCs have not been left out as they have been included into the BJP, particularly the lower OBCs who had been ignored by caste based parties. The OBCs have supported the BJP because they now perceive Hindutva as a broad identity that unites them with a greater story than caste politics, which is becoming less and less relevant.

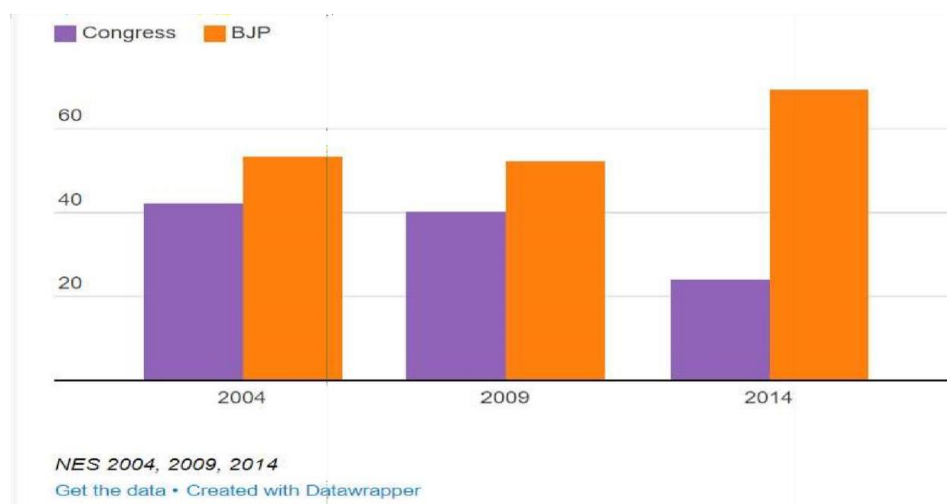


Caste Census

Robust data about the governed are necessary for group-based policy. The OBC reservation is the only example of positive discrimination or a group-based policy of reservation that is applied to a group that is not legally counted elsewhere in the world. It is necessary to conduct a caste census in order to determine the statistics that will be used to determine reservation allocations. The last caste census took place in 1931. Since only information about SCs and STs is gathered during the census, there are no exact estimates of the OBC population or of India's graded caste hierarchy. Empirical data that accurately depicts reality is crucial, and policies should be developed using accurate facts rather than guess work and extrapolation. In 2011, the UPA administration conducted a thorough door-to-door survey as part of a socio economic caste census; however, the results were kept confidential. It may show a greater proportion of OBCs than extrapolated from the 1931 census, which was the previous assumption. The results of a caste census would indicate that, contrary to popular belief, higher castes are a minority rather than a universal or general group, and that the number of OBCs exceeds that of reservations. Central institutions are seeing far worse conditions. Importantly, very few, if any, central universities have hired professors or associate professors under OBC reservations. In fact, at many universities, this figure is zero.¹³ The BJP is against the idea of a caste census because it believes it will increase social unrest and ensure that caste identities are maintained. The majority of political parties are in favour of the idea. Thus far the BJP has primarily garnered support among OBCs by forming alliances with sub-castes that have either been marginalised or at odds with caste-based parties, as well as by promoting the divisive and communal politics of Hindu-Muslim polarisation. In March 2021, this tactic was evident when the ruling party appointed numerous OBC sub-castes to the Union Cabinet and widely.

Demands for reservations for sub-quotas within reserved caste groupings may also result from a new caste census. Due to the fact that some groups have benefited disproportionately from reservations, there has been a call for subcategories to enable their distribution of job benefits based on the population within those groups. At odds with caste-based parties, as well as by promoting the divisive and communal politics of Hindu-Muslim polarisation. In March 2021, this tactic was evident when the ruling party appointed numerous OBC sub-castes to the Union Cabinet and widely.

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Reservation of OBC as a Vote Bank

Reservation politics have returned to the spotlight following the Mandal Commission's recommendation to introduce reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Political parties may include promises to protect or enhance OBC reservations in their election manifestos, aiming to secure the support of OBC voters in upcoming elections. Framing reservation policy within a broader narrative of social justice can be an effective strategy for building a strong vote bank.

The implementation of OBC reservations has aided the development of a distinct OBC identity. As OBC communities gain representation and visibility in political processes, they become more aware of their shared identity and collective interests. Consequently, OBCs have evolved into a political force with specific demands and concerns. OBC reservations have thus become a significant factor in vote-bank politics. Political parties deliberately align themselves with OBC issues, advocating for the preservation and enhancement of reservation benefits. They do so with the hope of winning over OBC populations, which constitute a substantial voting bloc in many regions.

Conclusion

In India, Other Backward Class (OBC) communities face a wide range of challenges, and the dynamics of OBC politics can vary significantly between states and regions. The relationship between vote-bank politics and OBC reservations is nuanced, and the objectives of political actors may differ. While genuine efforts are being made to address social and economic inequalities, some observers worry that OBC politics are being exploited for political gain. The nation continues to grapple with challenges related to inclusiveness and social equity. Due to the slow pace of progress in dismantling the caste system, reservations have been seen as a means to promote development. Consequently, dominant castes in some states have attempted to leverage the quota system to secure opportunities for advancement. Reservation policies have indeed expanded opportunities for OBCs, but ongoing debates underscore the need for a complex and dynamic strategy that balances social justice with concerns about effectiveness and fairness. The politics surrounding OBC reservations continue to shape, and be shaped by, India's march towards a more inclusive and equal society.