

Reservation Policy and OBC Movement in Assam

Troilukya Gogoi

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Kolkata

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The book deals with the issue of under-representation of the socio-economically deprived and backward castes and classes in the spheres of education, employment, administration, commerce and political institutions and the resultant policies of the Government to appoint commissions to identify the various categories of such people, their recommendations and policies adopted by the Governments for reservations for them in these areas in proportion to their respective shares in the population. It deals with the build up specifically of organizations of Other Backward Classes and political mobilization of the people in the region since Independence in the struggle for their interest.

The book may be useful for the policy makers, researchers and scholars having interest in the region

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Contents

Acknowledgements / 5

Abbreviations / 9

Introduction / 11



Reservation Policy in Retrospect / 25

Growth of All Assam OBC Association
The Movement One/ 47

Interest Articulation and Political Mobilization
The Movement Two / 75

Economic Condition Linked Reservation Policy
Conclusion / 97



Bibliography / 107

Index / 116

INTRODUCTION

Reservation Policy is an important issue in Indian political system which has gained considerable importance since independence. It has emerged as a result of socio-economic inequality among the different segments of the Indian society during the early part of 19th century. In fact, it was the result of a scheme of reservation to ensure upward mobility of the destitute section of the Indian society, i.e., bonded labour, untouchables and Harijans¹. In the last few decades the issue of reservation has been creating acute socio-political tension in the country leading to politicization of caste identities coupled with the reservationist and anti-reservationist movement. In fact, the issue of reservation has been instrumental in politicizing the organized masses; providing momentum to the process of alertness.

It may be noted that after Independence, the country was found to be sinking under numerous socio-economic problems. One such pressing problem was its poverty-ridden weaker section of the society who had been backward for ages. For all-round development of the country, it was necessary to provide additional attention to these depressed

communities who are economically weak, educationally backward and politically deprived so that by means of special privileges these groups could be brought forward and integrated with the country's main stream. These groups were identified and categorized as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and backward classes. The Scheduled Castes belonged to the Hindu community who were placed at the bottom of its order—Sudras they were called to serve the upper classes like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and so on. On the other hand, the Scheduled Tribes were those tribal communities who failed to reap benefit out of modern civilization. They were superstitious and lived with the mode and means of dark ages. Backward classes are categorized on the basis of the groups who did not have adequate representation in the field of education, service and commercial undertakings etc. To safeguard the interest of these groups, the Constitution of India has inserted certain special provisions for their speedy development,² which has subsequently resulted in the form of 'Reservation Policy'.

'Reservation' has been a temporary measure to meet the objective of creating a casteless society establishing social-economic equality among all sections of the people. The policy of reservation was to be abolished after a certain period. But instead of abolishing it the Government has so far adopted a

policy of extending its term repeatedly for years each time after its expiry with no hope of abolishing it in near future. It is worth mentioning that the first Law Minister of independent India and the architect of the Indian Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar brought about revolutionary social change and enlightenment among the Harijans who had been oppressed and suppressed for centuries by the caste Hindu. He tried to make the Indian Constitution cover all the citizens of India for welfare and upliftment as embodied in its preamble and in the relevant chapter on Fundamental Rights. The provisions for reservation are provided to the people by the Indian Constitution under Article 4, 15(4), 16(4), 29, 338, 340(1), 340(2) and 340(3), some of which were initially for a period of ten years only. According to the article 340 of the Indian Constitution, the first Backward Classes Commission was set up in 1953 under the chairmanship of Kakasaheb Kalelkar (MP) with the objective to investigate the social and educational conditions of backward classes and to suggest measures to improve their conditions.³ So far the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were concerned under Article 341 and 342, the specific castes/tribes were notified by the President after consulting with each concerned state. There was no disagreement or any lasting confusion about the castes/tribes to be listed and they were given the various constitutional benefits. The Kaka Kalelkar Commission listed 2399 (Two thousand three hundred

ninety nine) castes as socially and educationally backward and suggested reservations in government jobs for them to the extent of 25 per cent in class I, 33.13 per cent in class II and 40 per cent in class III and IV to improve their social standing.⁴ Significantly, the chairman (Kaka Kalelkar) was himself opposed to caste based reservation and had stated that "such a remedy would be worse than the disease". He was also against reservation on the ground that "the services are not meant for the servant but they are meant for the service of society as a whole".⁵ Significantly the Union Government headed by Nehru decided against accepting the recommendations. The recommendations regarding reservation made by Kaka Kalelkar commission were not executed for a long period. Therefore, the Janata government at the centre in 1979 appointed other backward classes commission headed by B.P. Mandal.⁶ Considering the castes composition, the commission classified as many as 3734 (Three thousand seven hundred thirty four) castes (excluding the SCs/STs) as backward with a population of over 52 per cent. The Mandal Commission (M.C.) while dealing with the problem of reservation for other backward classes (OBC) in 1979-80, wanted all-India caste figures. The commission has categorized thousand castes exceeding 50 per cent of the total Indian population (in addition to the 22.5 per cent SC/ST population) as backward to justify 27 per cent additional reservation for them.

On the basis of recommendation, the then Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced that 27 per cent of additional reservation to the OBC would be strictly enforced. No sooner had this announcement was made and the anti-reservation stir become very strong in some of the states. Nevertheless, the government of India formulated various reservation policies keeping in view the aspirations of different backward classes of the country but as a result the controversy has become more conspicuous in the country as a whole. These issues obviously have political overtones.

II

This study is intended to deal with the reservation policy with special emphasis on other backward classes movement of Assam since the post-Independence period, which created acute socio-political tension in the state. The origin of this tension may be traced back to the British rule. Under The British rule, the indigenous tribes/castes had to face various problem due to the discriminatory policy—the high caste people were given priority in different aspects like employment, involvement in the administration and revenue collection etc.⁷ As a result of discrimination under the British rule most of the indigenous tribes/castes had been deprived of advantages of social opportunities which created tension among the deprived groups. These deprived groups of people, i.e.,

indigenous tribes/castes had to face the major economic problem for their survival.

The Caste Hindu (C.H.) elite of Assam enjoyed better economic opportunities as well as social status under the British rule. Thereafter they became the dominant community in Assam both culturally and politically resulting from their economic position and upper caste status in the society. They even occupied important positions in the government as well as in the commercial undertakings in the state, and the unprivileged classes had to face keen competition in the industrial and commercial field with the upper caste especially with the Brahmins and Kalitas. Therefore, the depressed people such as the tribals and non-tribals ethnic group felt acute anxiety over such a situation.

After independence the situation became more critical in Assam as a result of the emergence of the issue of reservation policy. The issue of the reservation for OBC became even more serious after the recommendations made by the Kaka Kalelkar Commission (KKC). While observing the socio-economic condition of the people of Assam, as many as 44 castes had been declared as OBC by KKC, but the Assam government accepted only 29 castes as OBC from the report of the commission. These backward classes as declared by the KKC were the Ahom, Baria, Barui, Baroi, Barujibi, Chutia Choudang, Ganak (in Cachar only), Ghos, Gop, Gowala, Kumer, Rudra Paul

Introduction

(of cachar), Kupadhar, Kushiri, Rath, Malisya Das, Malisya, Manipuri (including Manipuri Brahmins and Manipuri Muslims), Moran and Motak, Mukhi, Napit, Nepali (i.e., Thapa, Gurung, Lama, Magar, Newer, Lahor, Domi, Gaine, Rai, Chetri, Limbu and Sarkie, i.e., Kobler), Rajbonshi or Konch, Sudra Das or Dey, Saloi, Sut, (scheduled caste converted to Christianity, Tantripal, Tanti, Tantri, Tea garden labour or tribes, i.e., Gonds Mundas, Khound, Sunthals, Sveras, Pans Oraons, Teli, Jogi (Nath), Maimals (Muslim fishermen), Moria and so on.

The people belonging to these castes tended to consider themselves as the deprived groups in the society in regard to social and economic opportunities, and so people belonging to other backward classes were under great tension. Resulting from such situation the Other Backward Classes organized themselves by forming 'All Assam Other Backward Classes Association' (AAOBCA) in 1958 in the state of Assam.⁸ The intention of the formation of AAOBCA was obviously to fight against the 'injustice' done to them by the Government as well as to protect their 'legitimate' interests. Though the OBC organization has gained popularity among the OBC elite, yet it has not grown and translated into a mass based organization.

The Second Backward Classes Commission under article 340 was appointed by the Janata Party

Reservation Policy and OBC Movement in Assam

Government under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal in 1978. After publication of report of this commission, anti-reservation movement became widespread throughout the country and Assam was no exception to it.

It appears that constitutional recognition of certain group as OBC has generated a sense of unity among these unprivileged section of Assam. Further, it has created an impression in their mind that they are being deprived of what they call 'legitimate' share of administrative jobs and other facilities in the state. For this reason, since the late seventies and early eighties of the last century, the OBCs of Assam have been consolidating themselves under the banner of OBC organizations capable of bargaining with the ruling elite for reservation of jobs and seats for admission in the educational institutions and so on. In fact, the very concept of OBC has been a potential cause of political mobilization in the state. In view of this, in this academic exercise an endeavour has been made to examine the several question: To what extent the OBC organization has been politicize in Assam? Would it be correct to call it an instrument of politics? Whether it has been able to fulfil the basic interests of the great majority of the downtrodden section of the backward classes?

Through a number of works have been done on reservation policy and OBC movements in other states,

Introduction

no academic work has so far appears to have been done in depth and detail on the OBC movement in Assam. However, reference may be made to the following work:

- ♦ G. Singh and H. Sarmah, *Reservation Politics in India-Mandalisation of the Society*, 1995;
- ♦ A.K. Vakil, *Reservation Policy and Scheduled Caste in India*, 1985;
- ♦ K.S. Chalam, *Caste Reservations and Equality of Opportunity in Education*, 1990;
- ♦ G. Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North-East India*, 1996;
- ♦ B.D. Puruhit and S.D. Puruhit, *Hand Book of Reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*, 1990;
- ♦ B.C. Bhuyan, *Political Development of the North East*, 1989;
- ♦ I. Prasad, *Reservation Action for School Equality*, 1986;
- ♦ K. Shukla, *Caste Politics of India*, 1987;
- ♦ A.K. Vakil, *Gandhi and Ambedkar Dispute*, 1999;
- ♦ L.K. Saikia, *Anyanna Pispara Shainir Shristi Kar in Soudou Asom Anyanna Pispara Shainir Shristi Kar (Assamese)*, 1984;

- ♦ K. Hatibaruah, A Socio-Economic Panorama of the North Eastern Region-An Analytical Study in *Surajmukhi* (Assamese Smrity Gantha), 1985;
- ♦ K.S. Singh, S. Mishra and S. Ghospal, Mandal Commission Report - Economic of Reservation, Frontier, September 8, 1990, Vol 23 No. 4.

These studies mainly deal with the socio-political and economic aspects of the reservation policy of OBC movements in the country as a whole. This study covers the political aspect of OBC movement in Assam.

The study has been divided into three chapters excluding introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses the reservation policy in historical perspective. While the second chapter deals with the growth of All Assam Other Backward Classes Association and its organizational structure, the third chapter examines the interest articulation and political mobilization of Other Backward Classes in the movement.

The study is based on the information obtained from primary sources, such as the relevant government reports, memoranda submitted to the different authorities by OBC organizations. Besides, newspapers, booklets, pamphlets and other relevant documents published by OBC organizations have been

Introduction

utilized to a great extent. In addition, published books and articles in journals were also used as secondary sources of materials. In this research exercise, a descriptive-cum-analytical method is followed to uphold the findings of the study.

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7. G. Phukan, *Politics of Regionalism in North East India*, New Delhi, 1996, p. 132.
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