

No Shortcuts to Dalit Liberation

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Ambrose Pinto's article, 'Saffronisation of Affirmative Action' (*EPW*, December 25, 1999) reminds me of similar and better articulated commentaries on reservations published in *Economic and Political Weekly* during the days of anti-Mandal agitation. These commentaries effectively exposed the upper caste character of the agitation. The need to fight upper caste arrogance under the pretext of merit underlined by the *EPW* was wholeheartedly supported by its readers.

A decade after the Mandal controversy, when I see scholars like Ambrose Pinto advancing the same arguments, but in support of lowering the minimum qualifications for facilitating the entry of dalits into higher levels of education and administration, I am finding it difficult to buy their logic. To put it this way might provoke some, to jump to the conclusion that I have also become a 'Manuwadi'. Nevertheless, I prefer to argue that raising demands for lowering the qualification marks for dalits may benefit a few aspiring individuals to get into higher positions, but such concessions, if implemented, would adversely affect the interests of the dalits in the long run.

From Pinto's article we understand that Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh state governments passed acts reducing the qualifying marks for dalits at the entrance level for the post-graduate courses in medicine. The Supreme Court struck down these acts on the ground that they were unconstitutional and against national interests. Criticising the Supreme Court's decision, Ambrose Pinto raises several issues concerning national interest, merit, examination system, evaluation methods and implementation of the reservation policy. His arguments, to some extent, succeed in exposing the hypocrisy of the upper caste elite, but fail to justify the need for reducing the qualifying marks for the dalit students. Reinterpreting the Supreme Court judgment, Pinto wonders whether there is any national interest independent

of the interests of members composing it.

Like many others, Pinto also seems to assume that the positions and professions in the country are meant mainly for providing livelihood and not for serving the people. This understanding drives him to ask why dalits with a lower percentage of marks cannot have access to higher professional courses, when the rich among the upper castes can buy both degrees and jobs. Here he does not realise the fallacy of his arguments. If unqualified persons are able to attain higher social positions through their superior caste and class background, then our aim should be to fight against such privileges. But Pinto cites them to justify the demand for lowering the qualifying marks for the dalit aspirants.

I am not sure whether anyone at higher levels of education and research can secure high marks only by mugging up and memorising the contents of the books, as Pinto makes us believe. Yet, I agree with him on the point that our evaluation methods for admissions to schools and colleges and for recruitment to government jobs are defective. His criticism of present evaluation and examination methods, however, seems to be directed not at rectifying the defects, but at justifying the reduction of the qualification marks for admission of dalit candidates to post-graduate courses in medicine from 35 per cent to 20 per cent and even less. Even if more rational evaluation methods, such as personality tests, IQ and EQ tests introduced as suggested by Pinto, I seriously doubt whether those students who failed to secure 35 per cent marks in the exams, dalit or not, would fare any better in the new system.

His thesis that professionals and government servants belonging to the marginalised communities, as a consequence of their personal experiences and background, would remain pro-poor is subjective and not substantiated by facts. While I don't deny the existence of some very sensitive and humane public servants and professionals belonging to these sections, I cannot

ignore the presence of sanskritised harijan elite, who remember their dalit identity only for their personal gain.

Even if one admits for the sake of argument that all dalits are pro-people in their attitudes and behaviour, is it not essential that they also possess some minimum knowledge in their respective fields to be able to serve the people better? I do not deny Pinto's observation that many less than meritorious from among the upper castes hold higher positions because of their proximity to the industrialists and businessmen. But will concessions like minimum qualifying marks for dalit students of medicine or engineering at the post-graduate level keep out equally undeserving dalit candidates the kith and kin of Jagjivan Ram, Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mayawati.

It is well known that many positions reserved for the dalits, especially at the higher echelons, could not be filled. There is some truth in the criticism that the reserved positions remain vacant for long as the governments and policy-makers lacked sincerity in implementing the reservations. But that is not always the reason. There are cases, especially in higher scientific and technological establishments, where in spite of repeated advertisements for filling up of the posts, dalit candidates having minimum required qualifications are not found. If one is serious about implementing the reservation policy, one should first accept this fact and then examine the causes of such a condition. Instead of devising ways and means to elevate the standards of the dalit candidates to the minimum required levels, some politicians prescribe short-cuts such as filling the positions by lowering the minimum prescribed requirements. It is a pity that certain intellectuals and groups claiming to work for dalits also welcome and fight for such concessions. I wonder whether Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar and Narayan Guru, names the dalit intellectuals and leaders recite, would have approved of such humiliating and self-defeating concessions.

I agree with Pinto that due to favourable socio-cultural backgrounds, students with upper caste and upper class backgrounds enjoy certain advantages over dalit students at many levels. There are indeed many structural constraints obstructing the dalit students in competing with other students. In our concern about the dispari-

ties, we need to find ways and means to remove these obstacles and create necessary conditions that enable the dalits to compete with other students. Pinto talks about the pathetic condition of the dalits, not to plead for creating a congenial atmosphere for the intellectual development of the dalits as a whole, but for seeking humiliating concessions for a few from the ruling elite. Pinto criticises the Supreme Court for its upper caste bias, without realising that the state governments in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, which passed those acts, are no dalit sympathisers.

It is well known that BJP's hindutva is anti-dalit and its present policy to advocating reservations only serves its vested interests. Pinto fails to realise that not only the BJP, but also other bourgeois parties in India, including the so-called dalits and pro-dalit parties like BSP, RJD, Janata Dal, etc, made use of the reservation issues to further their petty political interests. The leaders of these parties project reservations as the single most important instrument for emancipation of the dalits, and interpret social justice as synonymous with securing the representation of

dalits through reservations in parliament, state assemblies, bureaucracy, judiciary and modern professions. They want us believe that dalits get truly empowered only when persons and parties advocating this brand of social justice attain political power and form ministries at the centre and the states.

It is these self-styled leaders of the dalits who advance demands for concessions, such as reducing the minimum qualifications for entry into professional courses and civil services, to appease the elite among the dalits. Do the dalits, majority of whom continue to work and live as agricultural labourers and marginal farmers in their villages and as artisans, casual labourers, coolies, and industrial workers in the towns and cities have anything to gain from such slogans and concessions? The real interests of the dalits can be served only if reservations are accompanied by elimination of illiteracy and child labour, radical land reforms, socialisation of industries and development of rational and secular culture in the society. But these demagogues who vociferously advocate extension and continuation of reservation,

do not work for implementation of other measures, except making a passing reference to some of these tasks in their party manifestos.

Five decades after independence, caste prejudices, atrocities against the dalits continue. But such incidents should not make us jump to the conclusion that the caste system remains unchanged. Thanks to social and political movements of the 20th century, traditional hierarchical caste system has undergone considerable changes. Whatever might be their limitations, land reforms, the green revolution, industrialisation and urbanisation programmes promoted capitalist and commodity relations in the society and helped in weakening the economic basis of the traditional caste system in the country. Consequently, the nature of exploitation of the dalits has also changed.

Today there are no legal barriers to the lower caste practising other professions. If we find dalits still in their caste professions, it is due to lack of better opportunities, not because of any legal or social compulsions. Similarly, if most of the dalits continue to be subjugated and

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exploited, it is not just because they are untouchables, but also because they are landless labourers, tenants and marginal farmers, living at the mercy of the rich peasants and landlords.

The leaders of so-called dalit parties are not unaware of this transition. Yet with the sole purpose of political mobilisation they continue to project the 'Manuwadis' as the only enemies of the dalits. These self-seekers do not oppose capitalism and they do not even mind taking funds from the industrialists and businessmen for their project against 'Manuwadis'. If the leaders ever oppose monopolists like Tatas, Biralas, Goenkas, etc, it is because these industrialists also belong to brahmin or other forward caste communities. Viewing everything through the prism of caste, they overlook the fact that dalits are exploited by the capitalist-landlord classes and these exploiting classes include members not only from the traditional upper castes, but also from certain hitherto 'shudra' castes. The politicians deliberately hide the truth that underdeveloped and moribund capitalist system that we have inherited can never do justice to all dalits. They may zealously fight for increasing the reservation quotas, but conveniently keep mum about the economic reforms.

The reforms initiated by Narasimha Rao's regime and continued and supported by successive governments at the centre with the tacit support of almost all bourgeois parties, are squeezing existing job opportunities and making reservations meaningless. The social justice that they advocate is only justice within the capitalist system. What these leaders and their parties can at best do in the name of social justice is to fight for certain concessions to accommodate and satisfy the vocal elite among the marginalised communities. This would in no way affect the working of the capitalist system. As long as they do not demand equal educational and employment opportunities for all, the upper caste elite is only too happy to accommodate the dalit elite through reservations.

Finally let me make it clear that I do believe that reservation policy, with all its limitations, has helped at least a few dalits to get into the national mainstream. Today we find a few intellectuals, professionals and civil servants from the dalit communities, excelling in their respective fields. We come across quite a few bright and competent students coming up from these marginalised communities. Intellectual disparities between the dalit candidates and forward caste candidates have already

begun to narrow down in many fields. This was not the case two or three decades ago. One should allow this process to continue.

Slowly, but surely, a day will come when the dalits would find themselves as competent as the members belonging to the upper castes in all walks of life. Lowering the minimum qualifications for entry into the higher positions would only obstruct this natural process of growth. Such demands only perpetuate the sense

of inferiority among the dalits and strengthen the brahminical notion that the dalits are incapable of getting into higher positions without concessions. The problems arising out of centuries of neglect and discrimination cannot be put to an end through shortsighted opportunist politics. The path of emancipation of dalits is long and arduous. If they want to win the battle, the dalits must be prepared for the long march. [E]

Stability of Demand for Money

N R BHANUMURTHY

This is with reference to the paper 'Experience with Monetary Targeting in India' by Deepak Mohanty and A K Mitra in *EPW* (January 16-23, 1999). In the paper the authors evaluate the monetary targeting exercise in India. By using annual data for the period 1953-98 on broad money, WPI and real GDP, the paper suggests that the monetary authority in India should search for a new instrument in conducting monetary policy. Given the changes in the structure of financial sector due to economic reforms and the increase in the international capital transactions, the search for a new instrument is inevitable for the smooth conduct of monetary policy. At this juncture, the present paper is highly contextual and may lead to further serious work in this area.

Having said this about the paper, I have a few comments to make on the conclusions drawn which need to be highlighted for the benefit of monetary policy-makers in this country. My major disagreement with the paper is about the conclusion that money demand is stable in India for the sample period 1953-98. The authors used the recursive estimation procedures of cumulative sum (CUSUM) and cumulative sum of squared residuals (CUSUMSQ) which are mostly used in examining structural breaks in a time series.

I tried to test the stability of the demand for money function by using the same data set that was given in the paper. By using the same methodology and the same sample period, the results corroborated the findings of the paper. This indicates that the policies adopted by the monetary authorities are inconsistent with monetary theory.

However, interestingly, when we change the sample period the results were quite opposite. I considered the sample period of 1953-91, as the upper limit coincides with the beginning of economic reforms. From the results it was found that the money demand function is not a stable function (Charts 1 and 2). This conclusion may question the views of the authors and also the policies of monetary authorities as all its previous policies were guided by their assumption of stable demand for money function.

Further, by increasing the upper time limit the results were not changed. The 'instability' factor existed in the money demand function up to the year 1997. When we include data for 1998, the money demand function becomes stable. This finding may be attributed to the reform process and the 'lag effects' in the monetary transmission mechanism in India. Money demand function tended to be stable since 1991. This shift may be attributable to the reform process and to good monsoons. While verifying the predictive stability of the money demand function, the authors consider 1993-94 as the break point (see Note 37 in Mohanty and Mitra's paper) marking the 'beginning of external, financial and monetary sector reforms'. But the reforms started before 1993-94, i.e., in 1991 with the exchange rate devaluation, which will have impact on the stability of the money demand function. The results from the predictive stability may not change if the break point is 1991.

One more objection to the paper is about the statement: "...inflation in India was perceived not simply as a monetary phenomenon, but more importantly, a fiscal one". There is a controversy in India about