

RESERVATION CONTROVERSY ALIVE AGAIN

OR

THE GHOST OF MANDAL ROCKS THE COUNTRY

OR

A CASE FOR AND AGAINST RESERVATION

The Reservation controversy that had been lying in a state of hibernation for the last few years, was brought to life by Arjun Singh, the Human Resources minister in the UPA government when he announced that 27 per cent of the seats would be reserved for Other Backward Classes in all the institutes of higher education. This announcement was made on the eve of the elections to the state assemblies of W.Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam. It amounted to reasserting the policy of reservation supported by the V.P. Singh government of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the nineties.

The announcement immediately stirred up a wave of unrest amongst the student community who came out on the roads to oppose this reservation policy. Even though Arjun Singh was opposed by some of his own colleagues in the cabinet and a few members of the Knowledge Commission (two of whom even resigned on the issue), the Central government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh silenced all critics by appointing a 4-member Cabinet Committee to go into the issue. On the report of the committee, the UPA government announced that it would go ahead with 27 percent reservations for the O.B.Cs. and that this policy would be implemented with effect from June 2007. The government also announced that steps would be taken to increase the number of seats in institutions of higher education so that the interests of students belonging to the other castes are not harmed.

In spite of all this, the agitation against this reservation policy of the government gained momentum every day. Medical students from all over the country organized protests, hunger strikes, dharnas and demonstrations against the government policy of reservations. An organization named Youth for Equality tookover charge of the entire movement which was gathering more and more strength and sympathizers from all over the country.

Protesting students have a strong case. Reservations, they say, have been in place for more than fifty years now. It is only a very selected section of the Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes that has earned the benefits. This creamy layer continues to enjoy more benefits, thus defeating the very purpose and the spirit of the reservation policy. They also argue that now that India has already followed this policy of reservation for more than five decades, time has come to make merit alone as the criteria for admission to institutes of higher education and for jobs in the country. In the absence of any respect for merit, brilliant students would start migrating to other countries, leading to dangerous brain drain.

Those who support reservation continue to harp on the age old tune that people belonging to the OBCs are a deprived lot. They need reservation to earn a proper status of equality with others. The policy of reservation already in force has proved that it is not so. The facts prove that reservations help only a limited number of families only.

The strongest argument being put forward by the anti-reservationists is that the policy of reservation would lead to a division of the country on caste lines. This can lead to the disastrous consequences affecting the very unity and integrity of the country. The Supreme Court of India, in a PIL filed against the Reservation policy of the Government, took up the matter. It appealed to the agitating students and doctors to suspend their agitation and wait for the outcome of this PIL. A temporary calm appears to have descended on the scene for some time as the doctors have decided to resume their duties.

The irony of fate is that no political party in the country is prepared to call the spade a spade. Every party has an eye on the big vote bank constituted by the Scheduled Tribes and the Backward Classes. Rome is burning and the unmindful emperor continues to play on his flute. The country is facing a very uncertain future. The only way out appears to be the constitution of a high-powered, important judicial commission to go into the whole question of reservation again and arrive at suitable conclusion in the interest of all sections of the society. It is wisdom that does not prevail before it is too late, everybody may have to repent one day.