

# **Separate Electorates for Dalits**

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The congress has announced reservations for OBCs in educational institutions. The Congress does not want to solve the basic problems of bread and butter of the Dalits and instead aims to co-opt the best of their community in order that the majority does not rebel at their continued deprivation. Thus Gandhi forced Dr B R Ambedkar to accept reservations in geographical constituencies where Dalits and Upper Castes would vote together. Dr Ambedkar was afraid that only such Dalits would be elected from these constituencies who toe the line of the upper castes. In his essay *Emancipation of the Untouchables* he wrote: "It is common experience that the representative prefers the interests of his class to that of his voters. And why should it be otherwise? There is a homely saying that man's skin sits closer to him than his shirt. (For the elected representatives) class is his skin and constituency is a shirt which is one degree removed than the skin. The territorial constituency has long since been regarded even in European countries as a discredited piece of political mechanism. The proposals for occupational and functional representation furnish proof that there is a great body of opinion against the system of territorial constituencies." Despite these apprehensions Dr Ambedkar agreed to reservations in joint electorates under the pressure of Gandhi's undertaking a fast unto death.

A handful of Dalits are co-opted in the mainstream in this dispensation. These Dalits promote the interests of the upper castes while also securing personal gains. For example a Dalit MP is happy with the money he receives via MPLADS and is content to leave questions of vital interests of Dalits in the cold storage. As a result main issues relevant for Dalits-such as land reforms, economic policies to promote generation of jobs, restrictions on job-eating technologies, speedy justice and extortion of the poor by the government employees-have not been placed on the nation's agenda. Naturally there is resentment in the Dalit community. The Congress has decided to expand reservations in educational institutions to diffuse this resentment. Just as a bad doctor administers yet higher dose of antibiotics to a patient who is not responding to lower dose till the patient dies; likewise the Congress is increasing the reservations expanding the same reservations which are not solving the main problem of bread and butter of the Dalits till the society is broken apart. Reservations in elections and government jobs are proving inadequate to co-opt Dalits in adequate numbers hence reservations are being expanded.

This policy is doubly harmful. On the one hand the quality of governance and education suffers. On the other hand the basic problems of the Dalits remain unattended. It should be admitted, however, that a few Dalits do benefit from this dispensation. In comparison there was nothing for the Dalits in BJP's policies. But it still does not solve the problem of bread and butter for the majority of Dalits.

It is time that people re-evaluate the proposal for separate electorates for Dalits as wanted by Dr Ambedkar. Representatives elected from exclusively Dalit constituencies will be more accountable to the voters. The representative elected from a joint constituency is free to promote the interests of any class that he wishes. For

example, an MP elected from a joint constituency of agricultural labour and landlords is free to promote the interests of either group. But a representative elected exclusively from a constituency of agricultural labour will be bound to promote the interest of agricultural labour alone. The majority of people in the country fall into the categories of self-employed petty businessmen, agricultural labour and small farmers. These three constituencies may account for about 90 percent of the MPs. It will not be possible for a government made by these MPs to ignore the interests of the majority as being done presently.

The dilemma is whether to make these separate constituencies on the basis of birth-caste or on the basis of present occupation. Dr Ambedkar had demanded separate constituencies based on birth-caste. The problem here is that a person is forever locked into his birth-caste. A son of cobbler IAS officer who has graduated from IIM will still cast his vote and contest elections from the constituency of cobblers. Another problem is of creamy layer. It is often seen that Dalit officers are anxious to join the upper caste and look down upon their caste-brethren. Their personal interests are served if their caste-brother remains backward so that the facilities earmarked for their caste can be more easily appropriated by their family without competition from new claimants. A person born in the caste of cobblers but earning his livelihood as government servant should be removed from the former constituency and placed in the latter. No person will then be locked into his birth caste for generations.

The problem of creamy layer too will be solved. Presently an IAS officer born in the family of cobblers can avail of the benefits earmarked for cobblers for successive generations. This is possible because he changes his profession but continues to be classified according to his birth-caste. This problem will not arise in occupational constituencies. After becoming an IAS officer his family will be placed in the constituency of government officers and deprived of benefits earmarked for the constituency of cobblers. The issues of bread and butter are also more likely to be addressed because representatives will face no conflict of interests in their advocacy. However, a problem in occupational constituencies is that upper caste persons can become members of various constituencies such as those of cobblers. A handful of Thakurs can become representatives of sonars, mochis and raigars. A new creamy layer of upper caste persons may be created in various constituencies. This problem cannot be denied. But such a creamy layer is yet likely to be more accountable to their voters.

The present occupation points to the future position of a person. It is like the rising sun which will grow with time. On the other hand, the birth-caste points towards a person's past. It is like the setting sun that will soon disappear. Thus, one should classify people in different constituencies based on their present occupation. The government will be forced to make economic policies that enable the majority of voters to earn their daily bread under such a system. The income of the majority of people will increase and they will be able to purchase education from the market. Reservations in educational institutions will then become less important. Time has come to make occupational constituencies where representatives are forced to promote the interests of the voters. The government should stop the practice of co-opting selected persons from the Dalit community by providing more reservations. 