

NEWS WRAP

AGD

INDIA'S MODERNIZATION HAS been codifying the caste system, rather than erasing it. The original reservation policies were codified during the drafting of the Indian constitution, as quotas for scheduled castes and tribal groups. As different groups agitated for inclusion and politicians carved out new vote banks, over time other Hindu castes were added at both the state and national level. Even though the scheduled castes and the Dalits and other 'backward' caste Hindus have risen politically, they are the most deprived people socially and economically, in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, many of the Dalits and low caste Hindus have obtained government jobs or slots in public universities, opportunities that have implied stable salaries and better homes. But the affirmative action quotas for low caste Hindus, a policy known in India as reservation, is not explicitly available to Muslims. Hindu groups have long argued that affirmative action policies based on religion violate the Indian constitution and run counter to India's secular identity.

The issue of Muslim quotas has surfaced in the recent elections. As a group Muslims have fallen behind badly in education, employment and economic status, partly because of persistent discrimination in a Hindu majority nation. Low caste Hindus converted to Islam over the centuries, often to escape the deprived status to which Dalits were consigned. A caste affiliation and hierarchy still lingers among Muslims in India. By using former Hindu caste identities, along with economic and education indices, two government commissions attempted to include "backward" Muslims in the quota system.

ATTACKS ON CIVIL LIBERTIES

In 1976, India's Prime Minister passed the Foreign Contribution Regulations Act (FCRA), when civil liberties were suspended. Since January 2012, the union government of India has opted for an illiberal turn. Under threats from Muslim fundamentalists, in January 2012, the government stopped writer Salman Rushdie, the author of 'Satanic Verses' from speaking at a literary festival in Jaipur. After a Facebook page attacked Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party leader, the government has continued to censor social media. Invoking the FCRA, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has cracked down on dissenting NGOs. Four Tamil Nadu non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been charged, for opposing a nuclear power plant in the southern state. The NGOs are alleged to have violated the FCRA, which regulates foreigners paying for domestic causes. The union government has also addressed the Tamil Nadu state government to probe twelve more organizations for misusing foreign funds. While the FCRA law is being utilized as a stick to suppress criticism, the NGO's real crime is organizing demonstrations against nuclear power plant at Koodankulam, after the melting down of the nuclear plant in Fukushima (Japan). The government has failed to establish a case that nuclear power can be safe and cheap. NGOs are being blamed, with allegations that they are "often funded from the United States and the Scandinavian Countries".

FALL IN IRANIAN OIL OUTPUT

US sanctions on Iran have deterred foreign oil companies from investing in Iran and depriving it of the technology required to boost its flagging oil production. Hence, Iran's oil output has been in long term decline. According to the International Energy Agency, Iran's crude production has fallen 50000 barrels per day to 3.38 million barrels per day in Feb 2012. It was that low in late 2002. The fall in Iran's oil production to a ten-year-low raises fears of a drop to levels last seen during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. US sanctions over Iran's nuclear programme have disrupted an industry suffering from year of under investment. Heightened diplomatic tensions over Iran's nuclear programme continue. Iran may be forced to shut down some oil production, if it cannot sell the crude oil pumped. The drop in oil output further increases economic pressures on Iran, while there is a power struggle between conservative factions after the last parliamentary elections of March 2012. □□□