

RESERVATION

## VIVA 'ACADEMIC UNTOUCHABILITY'?

**Subhash Gatade**

*Jantar Mantar, a unique historical place in the capital, which today acts as a 'sanctioned abode of protest' under a liberal bourgeois regime, witnessed a protest dharna in the first week of February. Looking at the participation level, one could easily say that, it was indistinguishable from similar protest actions held on the same date. But it is incontestable that the raison d'etre for the dharna carried very large import which pertained to the entitlements of dalits, tribals or OBCs in higher education. It brought forth the surreptitious manner in which the Congress-led UPA government is pushing a bill which would do away with reservation at faculty level in institutions of national importance'.*

*As expected for the media managers and the pen pushers (or byte takers) employed by them the whole protest action was a non event. Question is why the articulate sections of the society, which yearn for justice, peace and progress, has joined the conspiracy of silence about this particular issue.*

*The return of 'academic untouchability' with due sanction of parliament and the further legitimisation it would provide to the 'merit' versus 'quota' debate need to be questioned and challenged uncompromisingly.*

WHAT IS COMMON BETWEEN Professor Sukhdeo Thorat, present Chairperson of the University Grants Commission; Dr Mungekar who is a member of the Planning Commission and Professor Ramdayal Munda, the ex-Vice-Chancellor of Ranchi University? A thing which is easily noticeable is the fact that all of them happen to be masters in their respective fields, but a lesser known aspect is that if the newly independent India had not followed its own mode of affirmative action programmes in the form of reservation for the socially oppressed sections at various levels, it would have been very difficult for this triumvirate to prove their mettle.

And if the proposed bill 'Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation in Posts and Services) 2008 tabled and passed by the Congress-led UPA government on the last day of the session of the upper house ( Rajya Sabha) becomes a reality then many such meritorious students coming from similar sections would not be able to even think of occupying any important position on the faculties of eminent educational institutions. The bill talks of doing away with reservation at the faculty level for the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and OBCs in institutions of national importance'.

Close watchers of the reservation debate in the country would say that the proposal was very much in the air and there is nothing surprising about it. In fact the directors of different IITs had been campaigning hard so that the Human Resource Development Ministry drop its proposal to reserve posts for SCs, STs and OBCs in faculty recruitment. Directors of the IIMs also which churn out hundreds of managers yearly for the likes of Rajus had also expressed their resistance in no uncertain terms to any such proposal which would disturb the PLUs (People Like Us) in the faculty. The sole argument peddled by the directors of these prestigious institutions revolved around the supposed negative impact on faculty quality if the reservation in faculties is not done away with. Prime Minister in his visit to Guwahati IIT few months back had dropped enough hints that the 'concern' expressed by the various directors would be given sympathetic consideration.

It is difficult to comprehend the utter silence even among the self-professed champions of dalits or tribals or backwards over this disturbing development. Can it be said to be a sign of the emergent consensus among the entire spectrum of political parties who do not want to be seen singing a different tune.

As things stand today, with complete absence of any national uproar over this step, there is a strong possibility that the bill moved by the Department of Personnel and Training in the Rajya Sabha in December 2008 would be passed in the next session of the lower house as well. And the long cherished demand of the "institutes of national importance" that they be exempted from reservation of posts at the faculty level would be fulfilled.

The 47 institutes that will similarly skip faculty reservation once the legislation gets Parliamentary approval include the seven older IITs, the seven IIMs, Aligarh Muslim University, Allahabad University, AIIMS. Also excluded from the faculty reservation ambit are 19 National Institutes of Technology (NITs), Jawaharlal Institute of Post Graduate Medical Education and Research in Pondicherry, Banaras Hindu University, Delhi University, Post Graduate Institute of

Medical Education and Research in Chandigarh, Visva Bharati in West Bengal, Victoria Memorial, National Library, Indian Museum, all in Kolkata, and the Indian War Memorial in New Delhi.

Apart from closing the doors to these 47 institutes to the historically oppressed, within one single stroke this move would drive under the carpet many related issues around reservation.

It is for everyone to see that of late, the non-filling of reserved seats or the rampant use of false caste certificates by non-dalits and non-tribals to snatch posts reserved for them, have slowly emerged as key issues of social movement. People have been witness to actions at individual or collective level which have not only questioned non-implementation of reservations but have also brought forth innumerable cases of phoney dalits and fake tribals enjoying the fruits of reservation at various levels.

Of course, the problem of false caste certificates, though brought into public focus by the media, is not unknown to policy-makers also.

The question of non-filling of posts is also a grave one. In fact, here one has been witness to the strange phenomenon of the reserved posts for the fourth class getting filled with 'eligible candidates' but as one moves up the matrix one notices a reduction in fulfilment of seats meant for them.

Delhi University is a case in point. Few years old figures state that in the year 2001 out of a total strength of 6,500 of teachers one needed minimum 1,500 teachers from this section of society. The situation on the ground was entirely unsatisfactory, when merely 100 teachers were on the job at the time of survey (which later shot upto 400). Delhi School of Economics, which had once witnessed the Prime Minister himself or Prof Amartya Sen as teachers also, fared no better. It had only a single dalit teacher out of sanctioned strength of 4. (1999).

The 1999-2000 year report of the National Commission on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes provide the details of the total posts and the number of people working on the reserved posts (which has been provided with 15 % reservation and the Scheduled tribe section is provided with 7.5 percent).

Professor : BHU 1/360, Aligarh 0/233, JNU, 2/183, Delhi Uni 3/332, Jamia 0/80, Visva Bharati 1/148, Hyderabad Central Uni 1/72

Reader : BHU 1/396, Aligarh 0/385, JNU 3/100, Delhi Uni 2/197, Jamia 1/128, Visva Bharati 1/70, Hyderabad Central Uni 2/87

Lecturer : BHU 1/329, Aligarh 0/521, JNU, 11/70, Delhi Uni 9/140, Jamia 1/216, Visva Bharati 16/188, Hyderabad Central Uni 13/44

Even a cursory glance over the figures pertaining to central universities (although the data is decade old) makes it clear why despite 50-year-old history of UGC since its inception in 1959, more than 250 universities and innumerable number of colleges under them, have not bothered to fill the 75,000 posts meant for the Scheduled Castes ? It becomes clear why they have turned a blind eye towards the fact that people belonging to the upper castes or other non-dalits have occupied these positions.

Leave the enlightened sections, one notices that there is a general disapproval among *Varna* society about providing reservation to the historically oppressed sections. Of course, there are rare occasions when the disdain they entertain about these sections becomes public. Interestingly in formal discussions they would have no qualms in singing paens to the 'tolerance as virtue' practised in their ageold civilisation, but in practice they would be ruthless in sticking to the graded hierarchy as preached by Manu.

Looking at the fact that most of such people, the practitioners of *Varnadharma*, look towards USA as a 'model country' it would be opportune to know how does the US society itself or the big capitalists there view the affirmative action programme there.

It is well-known that sixties witnessed launching of 'affirmative action' programme at the national level in US to provide equal opportunities to minorities especially blacks. The impetus towards affirmative action was twofold: to maximize the benefits of diversity in all levels of society, and to redress disadvantages due to overt, institutional, or involuntary discrimination. Of course it was no gift by the US ruling classes to the blacks and other minorities, rather it was a direct fallout of the civil rights movement there led by the legendary Martin Luther King.

The year 2002 witnessed the biggest challenge in recent times to this policy when two white students who did not get admission to the Michigan University went to Supreme Court to challenge this policy itself. Their main contention was that they did not get admission because of

the 'discriminatory' policy of affirmative action and therefore it should be scrapped. It was an issue which literally saw vertical division in US society. The Supreme Court ultimately gave its consent to the continuation of this policy. Interestingly many corporate leaders ranging from the Microsoft to the smaller ones had clearly taken pro-affirmative action positions. For instance, 65 of these companies (boasting a collective revenue of well over a trillion dollars) jointly filed an amicus curiae (friends of the court) brief with the Supreme Court in 2003. In this brief, these corporations maintained that a racially and ethnically diverse student body is "vital" to maximizing the potential of "this country's corporate and community leaders of the next half-century."

The debate around denial of entitlements to the dalits, tribals and the OBCs in higher education would be incomplete if two issues remain unaddressed.

Firstly, one needs to expose the various mythologies around merit which the *Varna* society keeps peddling to buttress its case.

Secondly, it is important to problematise the whole definition of institutions of 'national importance' and show how the hard earned monies made available by the public exchequer to these institutes (at the cost of basic educational needs of the deprived sections) end up creating doctors, engineers and other learned professionals whose majority (more than fifty percent) have no qualms in immediately moving to greener pastures—especially the USA—for good. *The Economist* (September 26, 2002) cited an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) survey that found that over 80 percent of Indian students in the US planned to stay on after the completion of their studies. The survey also revealed that Indian-students were more likely to remain in the US after higher studies than students from any other country.

Few recent studies on these institutions of 'national importance' can help create a better picture about the overall impact of such ventures.

'Media Study Group'—a Delhi based group of media professionals and social activists did a study about the 42 batches of passed out students of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) since its inception in 1956. In this particular study they looked at the information about the working places of passed out students from this institute. The 'Telegraph' had carried a detailed report about their findings.

*New Delhi, Dec. 26, 2006 : The All India Institute of Medical Sciences produces the country's top doctors, but more than half of them work abroad, mostly in the US.*

*A study on the current whereabouts of most AIIMS graduates released today by the Delhi-based Media Study Group shows that the brain drain in the medical sciences may be more severe than earlier believed.*

*Of the 2,129 students who passed out in the first 42 batches of the MBBS programme at AIIMS - from its inception in 1956 to 1997 - the researchers could trace 1,477.*

*Of them, 780, or 52.81 per cent, are working abroad.*

Interestingly coming to IITs a very similar picture emerges. In an informative and thought provoking article in *The Frontline*, Kanta Murali (The IIT Story : Volume 20—Issue 03, February 01-14, 2003) had analysed the IIT experience in great details. The article starts with a piercing comment :

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU could not have imagined that the 'golden jubilee' of India's finest academic institution, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), which he was instrumental in founding, would be celebrated in the Silicon Valley.

The IITs involve a considerable burden to the Indian taxpayer and this raises the important question of how the country should direct its educational investment. In a country with a woeful primary education record, government funding of the IITs is significant. In 2002-2003, the Central government's budgetary allocation to the IITs was Rs 564 crores compared with a total elementary education outlay of Rs 3,577 crores.

A few pertinent points emerge in the article :

- One glaring failure of the IIT system has been its inability to attract Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and women students in a progressive way.
- Studies suggest that close to half the seats reserved for SCs and STs remain vacant and that of those admitted a significant proportion, perhaps up to 25 per cent, is obliged to drop out.
- The typical IIT student is male, hails from an urban middle class family, and does not belong to SC/ST ranks.
- The IITs have an even more dismal record in admitting women.

- It is likely that close to half the annual undergraduate output of the seven IITs, that is, anything between 1,500 and 2,000 young men and women, go abroad every year - overwhelmingly to the US. It is estimated that there are some 25,000 IIT alumni in the US.

Everybody is aware that when Congress-led UPA government came to power, it made all sorts of pro-social justice noises to demarcate itself from the earlier dispensation. Apart from raising the question of providing reservation in private sector, it also talked about making the atrocity laws more stringent and even announced that it would make reservation a statutory right.

The proposed bill 'Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Reservation in Posts and Services) 2008' is being projected as elevating the provisions of reservations to a statutory right and supposedly instill greater sense of confidence among members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. As discussed earlier the bill is based on an unreasonable presumption that members of the SCs and STs are incapable of handling higher posts. It thus bars them from making any claims for adequate representation in appointments to such posts.

One can see that the bill lacks the constitutional spirit of providing equal opportunities to all citizens. To conclude, the bill has the potential of undoing in one stroke what has been done so far for improving the representation of SCs and STs in services by successive governments and is certainly a retrograde and regressive piece of legislation. □□□