

Caste-ism vs. ‘Merit’:

India’s toilers should reject framework of reservation debate

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The plans of India’s United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to expand caste-based reservations in central government-funded universities, including a series of elite professional schools, have provoked widespread student protests and an outcry from the corporate media and big business. Doctors in Delhi, Mumbai and many other cities have mounted walkouts in support of the students and the Indian Medical Association has lent its voice to the protests.

In early April, Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh announced that the Congress Party-led UPA intends to set aside 27 percent of all student entry-places at the All-Indian Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), and other centrally-funded universities exclusively for applicants from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

The OBCs are a state-defined agglomeration of caste groupings or *jati* who have traditionally been perceived to be socially inferior by the Hindu “twice-born” or upper castes and were found in the 1970s to be socio-economically backward. They constitute about 52 percent of India’s 1.1 billion people.

The designation “Other” distinguishes them from the Scheduled Castes (the former untouchables or Dalits) and the Scheduled Tribes, who together represent about a quarter of India’s total population. Close to sixty years after the Indian state formally decreed the legal equality of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs), most continue to live in abject poverty, and they form a grossly disproportionate share of India’s landless and illiterate.

The proposed 27 percent reservation for the OBCs would be in addition to the long-existing 22.5 percent quota of entry-places dedicated to qualified SC and ST applicants. Should it be implemented, 49.5 percent of all student-places at centrally-government universities—those considered to be the country’s best—will be subject to “reservations,” the Indian term for mandatory affirmative-action programs.

In an attempt to mollify opposition to the expansion of reservations, the UPA government announced Tuesday that it will increase the total number of student-entry places so as to ensure that the number of “open admissions”—those in the general or non-reserved category—does not fall. This will necessitate an increase in the total number of entry-places of about 50 percent.

Despite its own repeated claims of serious fiscal pressures, the government says it can find the money to fund this expansion—an estimated initial expenditure of 7,800 crore rupees (\$1.7 billion) and a recurring annual expenditure of Rs. 2,200 crore (\$500 million.) University administrators are largely against the expansion, however. They claim that even with the additional funding they will not be able to find the trained personnel and develop the requisite infrastructure (hostels, laboratories, etc.) to deal with such a sudden and large influx of new students.

The government also announced Tuesday that legislation sanctioning the expansion of reservations will be brought before the next session of parliament and that the 27 percent OBC admission quota will take effect as of June 2007.

According to news reports, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front played a major role in convincing the UPA government not to back down in the face of the protests and move forward expeditiously with the introduction of OBC reservations at central government-funded universities. Tuesday’s announcements came at the conclusion of a lengthy meeting of the UPA-Left Coordination Committee. Although formally outside the Congress Party-led UPA, the Left Front has propped up the UPA government in parliament for the past two years.

The government and Left Front claim that the extension of reservations in central government-funded universities to OBC applicants is a blow for social justice and against caste privilege. This is a cynical fraud.

In truth the extension of reservations is meant to provide a populist covering for the government’s continued pursuit of neo-liberal socio-economic reforms—reforms that have had a catastrophic impact on hundred of millions of Indians, including the vast majority of the so-called OBCs.

While Indian business and the most privileged layers of the middle class have benefited from India’s emergence as a site of cheap-labor production, research and business-processing for global markets, India’s toilers have seen their livelihoods ravaged by privatization, deregulation, and the slashing of public services and agricultural price supports. Just last week, the government admitted that more than 111,000 peasants were driven to suicide by poverty and debt between 1993 and 2003.

Moreover, the extensions of reservations serves to further entrench caste divisions and, as the growing spectacle of pro- and anti-reservation protests demonstrate, threatens to divert anger over the lack of jobs and mounting economic insecurity and social inequality into the dead-end of caste conflict.

That the OBCs face discrimination and are disproportionately represented among the socially disadvantaged is incontestable. The proposed new reservations, however, will benefit only an infinitesimal minority. At issue in the current controversy are no more than 25,000 university-entry places a year.

The claims made by those leading the agitation against the government’s plans to extend reservation—that they oppose casteism and are the votaries of merit—are no less bogus and reactionary.

Although a smattering of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislators have associated themselves with the student protests, the Hindu supremacist official opposition has, at least to date, given the government muted support on the reservation issue. Rather than opposition politicians, it is the corporate media and big business that have led the anti-reservation

charge.

India's business elite instinctively identifies with the protesting students, who generally come from the most privileged sections of Indian society, and resent government measures that could affect the educational institutes that provide them with much of their professional staff. But their principal motivation in egging on the student protesters is to ensure that the government does not act on its threats to extend reservations to the private sector should business fail to speedily implement voluntary, caste-based affirmative action programs.

Speaking last month at his maiden press conference as president of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), R. Seshasayee declared, "Mandatory reservation in any form is not conducive to competitiveness of industry. It is not acceptable."

Business doesn't want to be saddled with the additional costs of implementing reservations, but just as importantly it opposes any and all state intervention in what it considers to be the prerogatives of proprietorship.

While big business claims to champion the merit principle, what it really is upholding is the grossly unequal and socially regressive outcomes of Indian capitalism—a capitalism that couples the injustices of the free-market with the legacy of imperialist and caste oppression.

The horrendous inequalities of the present social order—an order that denies proper shelter, clean water and three-square meals, let alone equal opportunity, to the majority of Indians—are graphically demonstrated by India's education system. Six decades after Indian independence, a public education system cannot be said to exist, so woeful is the education provided by the state schools. At great sacrifice, even workers and peasants send their children, whenever possible, to private schools.

As a result of poverty and the lack of decent public schools, millions never complete even their primary education. According to the government's own figures, in 2001 close to 35 percent of all Indians and 50 percent of all Indian women were illiterate.

Less than 1 percent of India's population—ten million people—are currently enrolled in post-secondary colleges and institutes. But the quality of education that these institutions provide varies enormously. Many are poorly funded and lack the requisite infrastructure. Many graduates, except from the elite universities, fail to find decent jobs. Hence the desperation even among youth coming from the upper echelons of the middle class to get into the best schools and the intensity of the current protests.

Much is made about the merit of the students who secure places in the top institutions. Given that just 1 to 3 percent of the hundreds of thousands who sit the entrance exams each year win admission, they clearly are a talented group. But even the *Times of India*, which has been strongly supportive of the anti-reservation protests, concedes that few pass without receiving extensive tutoring, and that the cost of such special instruction makes it impossible for those who do not hail from well-to-do families.

While big business now presents itself as an opponent of caste, it has been quite ready to promote India as the world's most populous democracy despite routine caste violence against Dalits in much of rural India, as well as the continuing relegation of the majority of Dalits and tribals and large numbers of other Indians to a subsistence existence. Moreover, the Indian ruling class has patronized and continues to promote caste-ist and communal parties, including the Hindu supremacist BJP, and has incorporated caste categories into its forms of rule.

Reservations were pioneered by the British colonial state as part of its attempts to cultivate various petty-bourgeois elites so as to buttress its rule against the emerging nationalist movement.

Although the bourgeois Indian National Congress mounted controlled-mass movements against the British, it ultimately struck a deal with the India's colonial overlords and aborted the anti-imperialist struggle. As part of this abortion, it adopted reservations in parliamentary seats,

government jobs and universities for the Dalits and tribals, while instituting a modest land reform that stripped the landlords of their political privileges, but left the roots of caste oppression in the historic inequity of India's land relations essentially untouched.

Six decades of post-independence reservations have done nothing to lift the overwhelming majority of Dalits and tribals from poverty, yet they have nourished a small petty bourgeois layer that zealously promotes caste identities and politics, while at the same time defending the capitalist social order.

A similar process has taken place with the OBCs, although pressure for the defining of such a caste grouping came much later and was fueled by the growing crisis of the post-independence Congress project of national economic development, on the one hand, and the emergence of a relatively small, but politically influential layer of prosperous erstwhile-peasant farmers, on the other.

It was the Janata Party government—a coalition that united dissident elements of Congress, social-democrats, and the Hindu supremacist right and which came to power after Indira Gandhi sought to contain mounting social discontent through her authoritarian Emergency—that struck a commission to investigate what measures should be taken to ameliorate the condition of the "socially and educationally backward classes," a grouping it defined first and foremost by *jati* and *varna* castes.

Basing itself on the 1931 census (since the purportedly secular Indian state had ceased to compile information on caste affiliation), the Mandal Commission identified 3,743 *jati* as belonging to the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes, a grouping that has become known in popular parlance as the OBCs. Subsequently the government set up a permanent bureaucracy named the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) with a mandate to periodically update this caste catalogue.

The Janata government fell from power before the Mandal Commission had filed its final report. But in 1989, under conditions where India's nationally regulated and protected economy was mired in crisis, the National Front government of Congress-renegade V.P. Singh seized on one of Mandal's proposals—the reservation of 27 percent of central government jobs for OBCs—to try to burnish his government's claims to be a people's, even socialist, alternative to the Congress.

The reservation issue quickly became a *cause célèbre* with the Stalinist Communist Parties, which joined forces with V.P. Singh and various parties that claim to represent the lower-castes in pressing for the implementation of the OBC reservation. Meanwhile university students, supported by sections of the media, staged noisy anti-reservation protests.

Within this context, the Hindu supremacist BJP came forward to exploit the fears and prejudices of the middle class, as well as those whose families have traditionally been defined as upper caste, to agitate in the name of Hindu/national unity for the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of a famous mosque in Ayodhya. This agitation culminated in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in December 1992 and the worst anti-Muslim communal violence since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

Official politics in the early 1990s were dominated by the caste and communal effervescence promoted by the agitations over the Mandal report and Babri Masjid. During this time, the Indian ruling class, with the connivance of the Stalinists, successfully escaped the potentially revolutionary consequences of the collapse of its national development strategy and carried through a major strategic reorientation—India's full integration of into the world capitalist economy, so as transform it into a cheap-labor haven for global capital.

Likewise, the UPA government is bringing forward the reservation issue at a time of acute social crisis, with the aim of giving itself a populist guise and so as to be assist it in pursuing a socio-economic program with incendiary consequences for the vast majority of India's population.

And once again there is a grave danger that the Stalinists will enable the Indian ruling class to divert the mass social discontent of India's toilers into mobilizations focussed on the rationing of education-places and jobs—that is the rationing of capitalist misery—on caste lines. Such politics leaves the program of big business and the capitalist social order unchallenged and reinforces caste divisions, thereby allowing the bourgeoisie to press forward with the implementation of its neo-liberal policies and opening the door for the BJP and other ultra-right forces to falsely present themselves to the rural and urban middle class as their defenders.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges India's toilers not to fall into this trap. A genuine struggle against caste oppression is possible only through a movement led by the working class that mobilizes all sections of the oppressed, irrespective of caste, religion or ethnicity, against the UPA government and the capitalist social order.



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