

India: Mounting death toll as army deployed to end caste-based job agitation

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At least 19 people have been killed as Indian police and security forces, including 10,000 Indian army troops and paramilitaries, seek to force an end to an agitation aimed at securing caste-based “reservations” (affirmative action) for the Jat sub-caste in the northwestern state of Haryana.

The *Rashtriya Jat Mahasabha* (National Jat Assembly) announced that it was calling off the agitation Monday after India’s central and Haryana governments—both of them led by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—reaffirmed a pledge to give Haryana’s Jats preferential treatment in obtaining government jobs and university and college places.

However, the agitation continued into the evening in parts of Haryana and security forces killed three more people when protesters tried to prevent them from removing a road blockade.

India’s BJP government first deployed Indian troops against the agitation last Friday. It massively expanded the military intervention over the weekend, after the protests escalated in response to the initial security crackdown.

On Saturday, Jat protesters seized the Munak canal, which supplies nearby Delhi with 60 percent of its water, and diverted the water flow. Within hours, India’s capital and largest urban area was facing an imminent water shortage, forcing the Delhi Union Territory government to announce water rationing and the closure of the city’s schools on Monday.

The agitation has also badly disrupted socio-economic life across Haryana, with train lines and highways blockaded and some businesses attacked. Due to parts shortages, major factories in Haryana’s Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt have been forced to slash or halt production.

The Indian government and ruling class have responded, as they typically do to any sign of social opposition, with repression, violence and brutality. Over the past four days, military units have been deployed across the state, with curfews and shoot-on-sight orders imposed on major population centers, including Rohtak, Bhiwani, Sonapat, Panipat, Jhajjar and Hisar.

The Haryana agitation speaks to an acute social crisis. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who won election 21 months ago promising to bring jobs and development to India, claims to have returned India to “high growth.” The reality is India’s exports have fallen for 14 consecutive months, industrial production is stagnant and tens of millions are unemployed or

underemployed. And this is true not just for unskilled laborers, but also for ever-growing numbers of university graduates.

That said, the Jat reservation agitation is both politically bankrupt and reactionary.

It is predicated on acceptance of the capitalist profit system. It seeks nothing more than a more “equitable” division of the misery produced by Indian capitalism, through the parceling out of the paucity of government jobs and post-secondary education places on the basis of caste identities.

Such caste-based agitations strengthen the Indian bourgeoisie, the tiny elite whose wealth and incomes have soared as a result of the past quarter-century of neoliberal reforms, by diverting social anger away from a challenge to capitalism, enflaming reactionary caste divisions and splitting the working class.

For decades the Indian bourgeoisie and its political hirelings have manipulated and incited caste and communal divisions, the better to divide the working class.

A major element in this has been the expansion of the “reservation” system, which was pioneered by India’s British colonial overlords then incorporated by the national bourgeoisie, under the leadership of the Congress Party, into India’s post-independence constitution.

Presented as a means of promoting social equality and eradicating caste oppression, “reservations” have in fact only benefited a tiny layer of Dalits (former Untouchables) and other lower castes. This privileged layer, which has been deliberately nurtured as a social prop of bourgeois rule, zealously promotes caste identities, using them to lay claim to privileges and a share of political power.

Meanwhile, 69 years after Indian independence, the Dalits continue to be grossly overrepresented among the poor, the landless and the illiterate.

Initially restricted to Dalits and India’s tribal peoples, reservation was extended to other traditionally lower caste groups, the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs), in 1989, when the V.P. Singh government set aside 27 percent of government jobs and higher education places for OBCs.

Such is the perverse logic of reservation that numerous sub-caste groups, or rather their self-proclaimed caste associations and leaderships, have demanded OBC status. This included some that have traditionally eschewed identification with the

lower castes. Last year, Modi's home state Gujarat was shaken by an agitation in the name of one such group the Patidars, or Patels.

The Jats, a traditional Hindu-Sikh subcaste of small farmers that today comprises 29 percent of Haryana's population, are another such group.

The place that caste has come to play in Indian political life and the ability of the bourgeoisie to channel social anger along caste and communal lines is bound up with the criminal role of the India Stalinists parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM.

For decades, they have systematically suppressed the class struggle and subordinated the working class to the Congress and various regional and caste-based parties, while portraying reservations as "progressive" and supporting their extension, including to the private sector.

Over the past quarter-century the Stalinists have propped up a succession of governments at the center that have pursued pro-market reforms, while in the states where they have formed the government they have implemented what they themselves term "pro-investor" policies.

In recent years Haryana has been the site of explosive labor struggles, including at Maruti Suzuki and Honda Motorcycles, against the use of poorly-paid temporary and contract workers. But the Stalinists and their affiliated unions invariably isolated and betrayed these struggles.

A section of the Jat elite has long been agitating for their caste group to gain a share of the 27 percent OBC quota. Their campaign was given new impetus when the then Congress-led central government, in a crass attempt to stump for votes, gave the Jats in Haryana and across north India OBC status just before India's 2014 general election.

Subsequently, the Supreme Court struck this order down, reaffirming a previous ruling that said the Jats did not meet the caste and socio-economic criteria to be designated "backward."

It appears that the current agitation was instigated with the backing of the Congress Party in Haryana and a regional party, the Indian National Lok Dal, so as to make political hay at the BJP's expense.

Under the agreement reached yesterday between leaders of the Jat agitation and the BJP central and Haryana governments, the central government will form a committee under Urban Development Minister Vankaiah Naidu to prepare a "comprehensive report" on the Jat reservation issue and the BJP state government will introduce a bill in the state assembly to "provide for reservation for Jats in the state."

This, however, will likely lead to a new crisis. First, neither of the BJP governments have explained how they will get around the Supreme Court ruling against Jat reservation. No less significantly, other caste groups will likely forcefully oppose the 27 percent OBC share being "diluted" by its extension to the Jats. Already during the current agitation, a Haryana BJP MP, Rajkumar Saini, announced the formation of

a 100,000 strong "OBC brigade" for "direct action" to counter the Jats.

Expressing the views of a section of the ruling elite, the *Hindu* published an editorial Monday that defended the caste-based reservation system, while opposing the demand for its extension to "relatively well-off communities ...be it Patidars in Gujarat last year or Jats in Haryana this year.

"The Jats," it continued, "are a relatively prosperous land-owning community in Haryana ...high on the social ladder."

Such statements are aimed at promoting reactionary caste politics, by insinuating that caste in contemporary India is a socio-economic category. In truth Jats, like all other caste groups, are made up of people from different classes and with divergent and opposed class interests. While there is a Jat elite that is rich and politically influential and leads organizations such as the Jat Mahasbaha, the majority are small farmers who are being squeezed by rising prices, subsidy cuts and the parcellation of the land. According to press reports, 10 percent of Jat peasants in Haryana are landless. Others are workers employed in the globally-connected auto sector that has sprung up over the past two decades in the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt.

Irrespective of their caste background, for the vast majority of Indians, including the three-quarters of the population who are forced to eke out an existence on the less than US \$2 per day, reservation has done nothing. But for the bourgeoisie it has proven a vital instrument, a means of entrenching caste divisions, so as to use them to divert social opposition and perpetuate capitalist exploitation.

The eradication of caste oppression like the resolution of all the other uncompleted tasks of the democratic revolution in India will only be possible through the revolutionary mobilization of the working class, leading behind it the oppressed toilers, against the Indian bourgeoisie and for the reorganization of society along socialist lines, so as to provide jobs, education and quality public services for all.

The authors also recommend:

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