

## **Jat Reservation: For Domination or Deprivation?**

The recent Jat protest for the Other Backward Class (OBC) status in Haryana has reinvigorated the reservation debate. The Jat agitation is driven by domination, and not by deprivation. Hence, the current politics of reservation is a reflection of the shift that is taking place in the Indian reservation system. Reservation was initially seen as a remedy to undo the historical injustices meted out to the Scheduled Caste (SC) and the Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. It was later extended to the OBCs who were both socially and educationally deprived. Eminent sociologist M.N. Srinivas called them the 'dominant castes'. He defines dominant castes as those that are numerically strong and own relatively more land than others in rural India. Besides the Jats, the other castes that seek OBC status include the Patels in Gujarat, the Marathas in Maharashtra and the Kapus in Andhra Pradesh. All of them fall into the dominant caste category, and are closely tied to farming. Besides the moral or ethical validity of their demands, this article presents the socioeconomic factors underlying such protests.

The Jats feel a sense of loss: their hegemony over the changing economy and society is slipping away. There are broadly three structural factors that explain this ongoing Jat reservation crisis.

*One*, the waning of agriculture as an important source of livelihood is the principal factor. The Jats were the biggest beneficiaries of Green Revolution in India. Given their prosperity, they remained firmly in control of the rural economy and society. However, they are gradually losing control as agriculture has taken a backseat to other sectors. Land has become fragmented, and consequently the average size of the landholding has also come down. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS 59th round), the size of the average landholding in India came down from 2.63 acres in 1960–61 to 1.06 acres in 2003–04. The remnant of rural economy, too, is increasingly being overtaken by corporate farming and other modern sectors. All these changes have created a sort of 'ontological' crisis for the Jats.

*Two*, a substantial segment of this community is of the view that the opportunities for economic mobility brought in by the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s have bypassed them. There is a sharp class polarization within the community itself. Only the elite among them—which make up a fraction of the community—can afford higher education and get better job opportunities, while others miserably lag behind.

But, those among them who did gain from economic mobility have still not been able to fully participate in the modern corporate sector. They feel threatened. For instance, changing patterns of land use or the conversion of farmlands into concrete jungles has brought unprecedented wealth to this segment. However, they could not do much with this newly created wealth: neither invest in sustainable economic activities nor start a new business. At best, they have opened small shops or constructed buildings for rental purpose. In other words, they have recently made a switch—from being farmers to becoming rentiers. But, as one expected, the transition to a bigger role—from being an agriculturist to becoming a capitalist entrepreneur—did not take place. Some of them are into conspicuous consumption; for instance, they buy fancy sports cars and other expensive items only to display their wealth. Moreover, there is general perception that the Jats do not possess/lack necessary educational and social skills required for taking part in modern economic activities. The inability to cope with the changing economy and society as well as the accumulated frustration has unleashed violence in the streets of Haryana. There is always some element of truth in any mass movement, however violent it may be.

*Three*, the Jat protest only echoes what the Patels were doing in Gujarat a year ago—taking to the streets. Like the Jats, the Patels are also a dominant caste. They dominate the economy and polity of Gujarat. Traditionally, the Patels are a farming community. Just as the Jats spearheaded the Green Revolution in north India, it was the Patels in Gujarat who led India's milk revolution. The Patels were the first to introduce the concept of a dairy cooperative in India. They used these co-operatives as a launch pad for upward economic mobility and to capture political power. But now, they are losing their sway. Even Narendra Modi's 'Gujarat model' is not working for them. They feel they are losing out to corporates. As within the Jat community, there is a sharp class differentiation among Patels, too. Barring a few, the vast majority of the Patels are unable to find relevant jobs. Their investment in private education is also not paying off, which has added to the frustration. The demand, 'either offer me quota or abolish it,' is driven by this frustration.

Caste is a divisive force. The reservation system, which was supposed to be a remedy for historical injustices and systemic deprivation, has now become a tool for sustaining caste domination. This is not just the story of the Patels and the Jats; it also extends to include the

Marathas of Maharashtra, the Kapus of Andhra, and other dominant castes. The dominant castes who otherwise are politically dominant and numerically strong perceive a sense of loss as their hegemony over economy and society is loosening. They are not able to come to terms with the fast changing economic reality. On the one hand, they do not have enough resources including education needed to participate in a modern economy. They feel left out from the benefits of economic growth the country has been witnessing for a while. On the other hand, they also are not able to accept the relative economic and social mobility of the castes that are below them. The dalits have seen such mobility in some ways. The welfare schemes of state and central governments, access to education, migration, and employment in the non-agricultural sectors have all contributed towards this mobility. This mobility has reduced economic dependence of dalits on upper castes, the Jats in particular. And the Jats perceive a sense of loss. This sense of loss is largely a result of the rapidly changing economy and the frustration caused by the loosening of the grip over the lower castes, tells the story of the Jats.