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**CASTE INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE :
THE RESPONSE OF POLITICAL PARTIES
TO THE MANDAL COMMISSION REPORT**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
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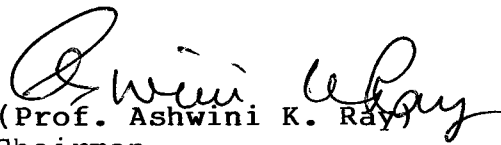
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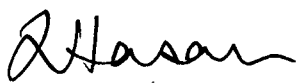


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Certified that the dissertation entitled "CASTE
INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE : THE RESPONSE OF
POLITICAL PARTIES TO THE MANDAL COMMISSION REPORT"
submitted by Vandita Oberoi for the partial fulfilment
of the degree of Master of Philosophy has not been
previously submitted for any other degree of this or
any other University. We recommend this dissertation to
be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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This is to record my thanks to my guide Dr. Zoya Hasan.
I wish to thank also those who reached out to
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Vandita Oberoi
- Vandita Oberoi

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INTRODUCTION

Despite changes in the social and political structure, the caste system has been a continuing Indian reality. With a hierarchical order legitimised by mythology and scripture and kept alive by the inequitable political and economic equations, the caste system itself has undergone many changes. Many such processes have been identified by scholars, such as - sanskritisation, politicisation and secularisation. But through all these changes, the disturbing fact of hierarchical inequality continues.

From the ancient period to the present day, there have been many critiques of the inequality inherent in the caste system which have aimed at alleviating it. These have ranged from assaults on the caste system to attempts at mitigating its harshness. Buddhism and Jainism opposed Brahminical authority, for example, though not the caste system as such. Other reformative movements like the Bhakti movement connected with Kabir, Chakradharswami, Tukaram and the Saint tradition; the Neo-Vedantic movement led by savants like Vivekananda, Dayananda, were all attempts to mitigate the inhumanity of the caste system within the Hindu framework. Phule and his Stayshodhak Samaj formulate the first critique of the caste system from the outside, i.e. a critique which did not first pledge allegiance to the overall rationale of the system.

When the government order of August 7, 1990 announced the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission Report i.e. the proposals relating to the reservation of 27% of all government jobs for the other backward castes, the debate on caste and social justice for the backward castes was born anew. What are the terms of this debate? How do we look at the caste system today? How do we define social justice for the backward castes? This thesis seeks to investigate the contemporary (Post-Mandal) debate on caste through an analysis of the positions of political parties. The positions that the political parties take on the issue of caste and social justice for the backward castes can be a representative fragment of the larger debate. This is so because the relationship between the unorganised individuals and the organised collective i.e. the state must today be understood through the working of political parties. Political parties both reflect and constitute the will of the people.

The questions that the thesis proposes to examine are essentially two -

1. what is the nature of the critique articulated by the political parties on the caste systems ?
2. what is the nature of the programme of social justice that they devise? i.e. how do they address the problem of caste backwardness ?

To assess the positions of the parties better, these questions may further be broken down into the following.

1. Is the critique that the political parties make of the caste system a critique of the system as a whole - complete with its cultural-ideological as well as socio-economic content, or do the parties merely take up the case of one or the other of the backward castes for compensatory justice ?
2. Does social justice mean only state action ? Is the state the only agency which must render social justice or can a programme of social justice also involve a wider cultural and social mobilization. What do the parties say in this context ?
3. Of the two forms of state action, which of the two receives more prominence today as a measure of social justice - distributive justice or empowerment i.e. - reservation of government jobs ?

And finally, 4 Do the parties make a distinction between the measures they prescribe for Scheduled Castes and those for the Other Backward Castes ?

The thesis shall attempt to plot the party positions on these questions and, on that basis, attempt to make a general assessment of the post - Mandal debate between the political parties despite the individual differences in their positions.

In order to identify the specificity of the debate between political parties today after the advent of the Mandal Commission Report on the political scene, this thesis also attempts to trace what various leaders located in a different historical time have said in response to the same questions. For this purpose, short summaries of the positions on the caste system and social reform of Phule, Gandhi, Lohia and Ambedkar have been included.

Chapter One traces briefly the historical - intellectual context of the debate on caste and social justice for the backward castes by summarising the positions of Phule, Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Lohia.

Chapter Two attempts to briefly trace the reservation policy of the Indian State in the states as well as at the centre. It concludes with the announcement of the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report's proposals for reservations. This chapter serves to outline the background of state policy against which the debate among political parties on the Mandal issue takes place.

The thesis takes account of major events such as the anti-Mandal agitation and the vigorous debate in the national press and the intelligentsia only in as much as they form the backdrop of the debate between political parties. These have not been, therefore, dealt with in depth.

Chapters Three and Four take up the positions of the major political parties - Chapter III - the position of the Janata Dal and the Left and Chapter IV - the positions of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress (I).

The source material for the positions of the political parties comes from documents and resolutions published by the parties after the announcement of the government order of August 7, 1990 regarding the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission Report. Contemporary newspaper reports on party statements have also been referred to. Due to a paucity of secondary literature on the subject the thesis refers mostly to primary source material.

Finally, the term backward castes has been frequently used in the exposition. This term has been used as inclusive of both the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Castes.

CHAPTER I

CASTE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE - THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

Ever since the announcement of the partial implementation of the proposals of the Mandal Commission Report by the V.P. Singh Government on August 7, 1990 the question of social justice for the backward castes and the specific form it should take, has become the centre of a fierce debate. It would help us to respond to the issue today if we were to go back to our past and see how this issue has been perceived and answered by Phule, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Lohia. How was this issue taken up at another time, by other people living in a different set of historical circumstances? Much has, of course, changed over the years. But what links these four to each other and further to us is a common discursive space fashioned to a large part by the beliefs and values of modernity i.e. democracy, secularism and equality. What, however, separates us from them is the coming into existence and development of the Indian state.

Phule, however, stands at a peculiar juncture, i.e. the mid 19th century, when these new beliefs and values were only just creeping in: when what was only slowly and for the first time becoming significant was "the ability of reformers to invoke the public interest in their opposition to existing beliefs and institutions Hindu social reformers based many of their arguments on the idea that the

'public interest' represented a 'universal good.'¹ The reformers opposed this to many existing social and religious practices, which served only the interests of particular groups. They laid great emphasis on the frequent conflict between the partial and selfish concerns of particular social groups and the good of the community as a whole. It transcended all sectional interests and formed the final criterion for assessing social, religious and political activity at all levels of society. People were looking at the caste system anew. "In place of the appeal outlined in religious writings to the special religious privileges of high caste groups, radicals and reformers could assert the social imperative of the welfare of the community. The effectiveness of such an assertion lay in the creation of a compelling new set of values for the legitimation of social and religious forms that rivalled, and threatened to displace the traditional sources of social and religious authority."² The notions of 'public interest' and of a secular concern for distributive justice' were coming into being. Phule stands at the very threshold of the modern age in India.

What then are the specific questions which we can ask of each of these four thinkers ?

1. What is the nature of their critique of the caste system?

2. What, according to them, must comprise a programme of social justice ? What are the agencies through which this social justice may be dispensed to the backward castes ?

PHULE

Born in mid 19th century Maharashtra, into the Mali (Sudras) caste, caste was for Phule not merely an issue of public debate, it was a personal question. Phule rejected the rigid hierarchy of the caste system. He could see that the British institutions offered great possibilities, both of employment and of influence to those Indians able to find employment in them. But it was also clear that these new opportunities for political and administrative power required certain skills from those who wished to exploit them. These skills consisted, above all, of a high degree of literacy, a command of fluent English, a familiarity with new administrative procedures and the urban as well as rural Indian society. It was here that the conventional attitudes towards education influenced the ability of different groups to respond to these opportunities. The old association of the higher castes with the skills of literacy gave them a much greater flexibility and readiness to exploit these new possibilities as against the agricultural or urban lower castes.³ Thus, Phule took on the task of challenging the rigid hierarchy that kept the Brahmans in a privileged position above the other castes.

Phule challenged the Hindu ideas about the relationship between God and man, between the natural and the sacred, and the individual and society - using missionary arguments to reject conventional Hindu beliefs and using what were the ideas of European religious radicals to stop short of accepting Christian or any other revealed religious doctrine in its place. He put forward the notion of the divine as a single and unique being, the creator of all existing things and source of all moral law. A clear separation was made between the sacred or the divine and the natural and social worlds. The natural world, shorn of magical significance, was left open to investigation by secular reason; and the religious sanction removed from the rules governing the hierarchies of Hindu society exposing them as merely human constructs.

Having shorn the caste system of its sacred and magical power, Phule attacked its hierarchy, blaming it for India's material and intellectual impoverishment. Phule held the Brahmans unequivocally responsible for the condition of the low castes and for the backwardness of the Hindu society itself - "..... who dress themselves up and parade around in their purity have only one intention - and that is to think that they are more pure than other people"⁴. In his play - 'The Third Eye' he rejects decisively the view that the sufferings of the lower castes were the products of a social system supported by all except the untouchable castes.⁵ The subject of the play was the

exploitation of an ignorant and superstitious peasant couple by a cunning Brahmin priest and their subsequent enlightenment by a Christian missionary. It urged that Hindu religion was both an ideological imposition upon the lower castes and in its insistence on ritual and ceremony, a cause for their oppression.

Phule suggests a way out of this unfortunate condition of the lower castes. He makes a plea for the education of the low and untouchable castes. But what was required for any reform to take off, was the coming together of the lower castes - by forging a new collective identity. Phule attempted to use traditional social categories and cultural symbols in a new way to integrate the lower castes into a new collective - that of the oppressed. The aim of his plays was to convince his audience - the 'Mali - Kunbi' grouping, the 'Mang-Mahar' or the 'Sudras - ati-Sudras' combines that this collective shared common interests and a common social position. This awareness of a common identity was sought to be discovered or rather invented through the projection of common ancestors such as Bali and Shivaji, through the reinterpretation of familiar terms (for example - Phule describes the term 'Mahar' as a derivative of the phrase Maha - Ari, meaning the great enemy.⁶) and other such manipulation of familiar cultural symbols.

Phule contended that the old identities and their hierarchies derived their strength from their roots in the most important Hindu religious accounts of the Indian

society. To this, Phule responded by providing alternative accounts of the texts, myths, stories, most common in Hinduism. He did this through the medium of his plays, his pavadas, and the work of the organisation he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj.

Phule, rejects the caste system and its hierarchy. But Phule's rejection is distinctively double - edged, caught as he is midway between the traditional order and the modern one. He rejects the hierarchy which places the Brahmin above the Sudras but his rejection interprets those very symbols, myths and texts which are the source of the Brahmin's power, against them. To give the Sudra justice, it becomes necessary to portray him as the Kshudra - the Kshatriya - the original inhabitant of the Kshetra - vanquished in the hoary past by the foreign Aryan/Brahmin. For the alleviation of the backward castes, he looks forward to the emergence of a new cultural consciousness among the oppressed; to fight back through education and entry into the administrative services, the injustices meted out to them.

GANDHI

By the time Gandhi comes to political centrestage, the national movement for independence has become the backdrop to all issues - social as well as political. For Gandhi the caste question would be a question for Swaraj to answer. Our relationship with caste has to do with our

relationship with our moral conscience. What Gandhi would ask, could state power - either British or even Indian, possibly do here ?

Repelled and personally violated though he felt by the practice of untouchability, Gandhi believed that it was, but an excrescence of a system which was essentially good and pure. To understand Gandhi's relationship with the caste system, his insistence on separating a pure and beneficent essence from a corrupt and exploitative form, one needs first understand the way he relates to Hinduism. "I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moved me as no other woman in this world could. Not that she had no faults Even so, I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations."⁷

Similarly, the varnavyavastha, warts and all, was still dear to Gandhi. Gandhi saw all the exploitation as not inherent in the system itself - but as a historical accretion. Thus, he sets about separating the real and the pure, from the external and the impure : "The four divisions define a man's calling, they do not restrict or regulate social intercourse."⁸ The varnavyavastha, according to Gandhi, gave to the individual a rightful place, a sense of location in the community. By defining roles for each individual, it made for an integrated and interdependent community. Circumscribing the individual by his assigned role, it helped in fostering a necessary kind of self-

control. "Varnashrama is self-restraint and conservation and economy of energy."⁹

Gandhi even goes on to claim a natural inevitability for the varnavyavastha - "Varna", he says, "is not a human invention, but an immutable law of nature, the statement of a tendency that is ever present and at work like Newton's law of gravitation. Just as the law of gravitation existed even before it was discovered, so did the law of varna. It was given to the Hindus to discover the law."¹⁰

Gandhi clearly expresses his allegiance to the varnashrama dharma. He accepts too, its laws of heredity. The varnashrama dharma, he says, does attach to birth : "A man cannot change his varna by choice. Not to abide by one's varna is to disregard the law of heredity."¹¹ Elsewhere, he says: "His birth makes a Brahmin predominantly a man of knowledge, the fittest by heredity and training to impart it to others." And though there is nothing again to prevent the Sudra from acquiring all the knowledge he wishes, only he will best serve with his body and need not envy others for their special quality for service."¹²

Restrictions on interdining and inter-marriage essential to the varnavyavastha, too, do not threaten Gandhi's faith in the system. If friendly relations depended on eating together and intermarriage, he argues, the German and the British would not be fighting against each other.¹⁹ Gandhi accepts the caste system as a system of locating the

individual in the organic whole of the community. At the same time, he condemns many of the exploitative practices that have attached themselves to the system. He derides the blowing up of the 'original' four divisions into the 'existing innumerable castes' (making a distinction, thus, between the varna and the jati systems), the 'elaborate ceremonies' and the many 'artificial restrictions'.¹⁴ These, according to Gandhi, are harmful to the growth of the religious spirit and the social well-being of the Hindus. And the sooner there is fusion between the many subdivisions and sub-castes, the better.

Gandhi also makes an important distinction between a division of roles and hierarchy of the same. He approves the division of roles that the varnavyavastha makes but rejects the hierarchy that attaches itself to these divisions. The notions of superiority and inferiority, he thought, need not follow the delineation of roles and the demarcation of roles connotes duties, not privileges; service not status. Untouchability - which he condemned as a 'sin' and a 'great crime' was merely the by-product of such notions of hierarchy.¹⁵

In his response to the caste system, therefore, Gandhi makes a distinction between the four - fold varnashrama division which roots the individual in the community, and the hierarchical caste system with the untouchable as its outcast. Whether such a demarcation is allowed scriptural sanction or not is not Gandhi's concern.

It is just and that is enough for him. "It is no good quoting verses from manusmriti and other scriptures in defence of this orthodoxy. A number of verses in these scriptures are apocryphal, a number of them are quite meaningless....."¹⁶

For the way out of the problems that the varnavyavastha finds itself mired in, Gandhi looks to changes within the overall system. Uprooting the system itself would, for him, be no solution at all. It is as wrong to destroy caste because of the outcast, he says, as it would be to destroy a body because of an ugly growth in it or a crop because of the weeds.¹⁷

Reform, for Gandhi, must come from the awakening of conscience of the high castes. It is a penance, he says, that the caste Hindus owe to Hinduism and to themselves. No politico-legal initiative could meet this challenge. No force of a group, caste, or government machinery can help in the eradication of this evil. Governments simply gave expression to the will of the people. Untouchability, he said, will not be removed by the force even of law. It can only be removed when the majority of Hindus realize that it is a crime against God and man and are ashamed of it. In other words, it is a process of conversion - i.e. purification of the Hindu heart.¹⁸ The aid of law should only be involved when it hinders or interferes with the progress of the reform. The removal of untouchability was,

therefore, for Gandhi, a moral imperative; scarcely political.

Gandhi also rejects the move for separate electorates for the untouchables in 1932. He is wary of any attempt to segregate the untouchables. They must be seen as parts that the Hindu order must reclaim for itself. And this reclamation must be done by the Savarnas themselves. Not the state, nor the government can do this job. Undertaking a fast unto death in protest against the communal award in September, 1932 in Yeravda jail, Gandhi asks plaintively, "Do you want the untouchables to remain untouchables forever?"¹⁹

To summarise Gandhi's response to our two questions: The varnavyavastha must be preserved with its role division, but hierarchy must be done away with. Gandhi very definitely did not mouth the secular modernist idiom which talks so freely of legal and political rights, constitutional safeguards et al. But one cannot even locate him with any firmness in the traditional order because he refuted so much of that too. Perhaps, it would be safer to say that he belonged to the Hindu belief system, retaining the prerogative to say 'no' to parts of it and also the right to still be counted within.²⁰ To the second question - what needs to be done - Gandhi's answer was unequivocal. The evils of the caste system must be removed not by recourse to

legal measures by the state, but by an awakening within the community.

AMBEDKAR

Like Gandhi, the national movement for independence provides the turbulent backdrop for Bhim Rao Ambedkar's life-work too. And the confidence with which the caste problem is posed as a question to the State today demanding distributive justice for the lower castes, is Ambedkar's legacy to our times.

Ambedkar is unequivocal in his rejection of the caste system. There is a dilemma, though that he must grapple with. A Scheduled Caste by birth and a convert through his education to the modernist idiom, Ambedkar, nevertheless, vacillates between developing a critique of the caste system from within the Hindu world view and rejecting the caste system totally and with it Hinduism too. He tries, through his writings, to project an alternative identity for the Sudras as having originally been Kshatriyas by reference to scriptural sources.²¹ He eventually rejects Hinduism and converts to Buddhism.

Ambedkar sees the caste system through the outcast. He judges the community through the plight of the excommunicated. To him, a system that could create the Harijan is intrinsically evil. Unlike Gandhi, therefore, Ambedkar makes no distinction between a theory/essence which is pure and unsullied and the distorted practice. The

varnashrama vyavastha was what it had lived itself out to be. The 'distortions' were the system itself. "The outcast is a by-product of the caste system. There will be outcastes as long as there are castes. Nothing can emancipate the outcast except the destruction of the caste system."²² Ambedkar, therefore, comes to locate himself intellectually not within the Hindu world-view, but in a modern secular world where all are equal before the law of the land. Ambedkar's vision of a democratic society is one in which there would be neither an oppressor class, nor a suppressed class and where all would be assured equality before the law.

For Ambedkar, constitutional safeguards were necessary to assure that justice is done to the Schedule Castes. He fought for the implementation of the Communal Award, taking on Gandhi, who, with his threat of a fast unto death, opposed the Award on moral and religious grounds. Gandhi feared that it would divide and disrupt Hindus. Ambedkar, on the other hand, talked of rejecting the Hindu faith - if it was not purged of the 'chaturvarna'. Ambedkar agreed with Gandhi that the caste Hindu was responsible for the plight of the Untouchable. But he did not have faith in the caste-Hindu effort including that of Gandhi and the Congress to ameliorate and emancipate the Harijan. He wanted constitutional and statutory safeguards in place of having to depend on the goodwill of others. Instead of wasting time and energy demanding temple entry, the lower castes must

strive to capture political power. With political power, they can get all other things in their favour - such as higher education, employment and better ways of earning a living. Thus Ambedkar, like Phule before him, spoke directly to the low castes - they were his constituency. Justice was not the duty of the higher castes, as it was for Gandhi who addressed himself mainly to the savarnas. It was, rather, the right of lower castes. This right must also be guaranteed by the Constitution.

On Gandhi's opposition to the Communal Award, therefore, one can almost hear Ambedkar's disgust in Nehru's voice: "...and I felt angry with him at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question and his frequent references to God in connection with it what a terrible example to set!"²³

Ambedkar's position is brought more sharply into focus in his differences with Gandhi on yet another attempt at reform - the temple entry issue. Two bills were prepared in Madras - by Subbaroyan for introduction in the Madras Legislative Council, and by Ranga Iyer for introduction in the Central Assembly, on temple entry.²⁴ When Gandhi sought Ambedkar's support for these two bills, Ambedkar refused. He would not support the Subbaroyan bill, he said, because it depended for a solution on a referendum and not the right to worship of the Depressed Classes. He could not support Ranga Iyer's bill either, (he said on February 12, 1933, because it was based on the principle of majority). "Sin and

immorality", he said, "cannot become tolerable because a majority is addicted to them or because the majority chooses to practice them."²⁵ Ambedkar did not consider it of immediate importance to fight for the entry of the Depressed Classes into temples.

Gaining entry into temples was not Ambedkar's aim. He wanted that the lower castes should fight, instead, for their right to equality before law, higher education, higher employment and better ways of earning and living. Addressing himself to the caste Hindus, he said, if they do not open the temple doors to him : "...then shut the doors and damn yourself. For I do not care to come."²⁶

The two questions specified in the beginning of the chapter, would then draw the following response of Ambedkar: The caste system is to be rejected in totality. The system as a whole must be held responsible for the outcast, This rejection is that of a liberal-constitutionalist. Further, caste reform is to be a politico-legal programme to be implemented in terms of measures like communal electorates by the secular State. Thus, it is the State which must take on the programme of emancipation of the lower caste by securing for them equality of status and by ensuring constitutional safeguards to protect this equality.

LOHIA

"The Indian people are the saddest on the earth",²⁷ laments Ram Manohar Lohia in an India which has already won

her freedom and sovereign statehood from the British. "I am convinced that the two segregations of caste and woman are primarily responsible for this decline of the spirit. These segregations have enough power to kill all capacity for adventure and joy," he says.²⁸

Lohia condemns the caste system and holds it responsible for the country's emasculation and for the foreign conquests it has repeatedly suffered. What else, he asks, would one expect in a country where nine-tenths of the population are rendered into mere onlookers? Lohia's critique of the caste system, like Ambedkar's, stems from the intellectual position he takes outside of it. Witness, therefore, his disgust at the public bathing of the feet of two hundred Brahmins in Banaras by the president - Dr. Rajendra Prasad:- "To bathe another's feet publicly is vulgar, to restrict this vulgar privilege to the caste of Brahmins should be a punishable offence".²⁹ "I warn such Brahmins of Banaras and elsewhere as are gloating over this debasement of the human spirit and of the Indian Republic Evil acts and pleasure in them recoil."³⁰

His indignation stems not only from the act violating humane values, but also the dignity of the Indian Republic. Democratic, Socialist and Republican values have been undermined, not only the moral conscience of the high-caste Hindus as Gandhi might have said. And so, caste reform, too, must proceed from the democratic State. The administration must take up this challenge to restore its

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democratic, secular character. Lohia is clear that a direct attack on the caste system by the State is absolutely essential. "All war on poverty is a sham unless it is at the same time a conscious and sustained war on the two segregations of woman and caste"³¹, he says.

His suggestions for reform include the following measures : that marriage between Sudra and Dvija should be laid down as a qualification among others for recruitment to the administration and the armed forces, that the refusal to interdine should be made a positive disqualification; that the tax on profitless agriculture should be abolished and that the price policy should be fixed in accordance with the principles laid down by the Socialist party.³²

Lohia is also concerned with the most crucial issue in the modern debate on caste reform. the issue of - reservations in Govt. jobs primarily, and also in education. Lohia is convinced that there must no reservation in education.³³ Though scholarships may be given in larger number to backward castes, but there should be no such protection by which Dvija boys and girls are prevented from education. On the question of reservations, at one time, Lohia believed that "the dvijas, in special conditions, should not get government services"³⁴ They must, instead, be encouraged to find private avenues of employment leaving the public services free for the backward castes. But he modifies his position later when he suggests a sixty percent

reservation of "all the high opportunities in the country such as gazetted services or leadership posts".³⁵

On the question of 'merit' which is (again a very crucial one in the modern debate) Lohia says - "As long as ability and qualification is a test for opportunity, the Indian people will remain deprived of their abilities and reservation would stay on paper."³⁶ How can people who have been exploited and deprived of opportunities for advancement for centuries be expected to compete with their oppressors in a free and equal competition? In Lohia, we also find, an awareness of the undesirable consequences of reservation. Lohia shares with us our fear-what if reservations or the system of preferential opportunities is misused by the more advanced and powerful among the backward castes ?

Lohia clubs the Ahirs and the Mahars along with the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas as the four 'colossi' of the Indian caste-system. Shifts in the status and conditions of the four classes he says, may be of the greatest interest to them but are of little significance to society as a whole".³⁷

Lohia rues the damage that this 'sectional elevation' might do.³⁸ It would merely change some relationships within the castes, leaving the basis of the system unaltered. Which brings Lohia to the big question - So are reservations by themselves of any use ?

With a little prosperity, he says, the Sudras are inclined to pick up the bad habits of the Dvijas. "No sooner does a Sudra acquire a little wealth, than he tries to force his women behind the purdah" he says. And the educated and well-to-do amongst the Sudras are more often motivated by "a sense of jealousy" and "the social atmosphere is such as aggravates this feeling. Some of the leaders take advantage of such a state of affairs for furthering their own political and personal ends."³⁹

Lohia seems to be arriving at the conclusion that caste backwardness cannot be alleviated through reservations alone. Caste will not to be erased by jobs because caste is not a matter of economic security alone. "Caste gives them (the lower castes) insurance, indeed on less than an animal level, more than it does to the higher castes," he says. They would feel helpless without it. Often, he says, one gets the impression about these lower castes as though their strenuous labors of the day were but a preparation for the caste feasts and rituals that are to follow. Anything that interferes with them appears to them as highly undesirable. They have, in fact, Lohia marvels, legends and myths that justify their lowly situation and transform it into a symbol of sacrifice and lustre."⁴⁰ What could be the solution to this complex problem? Would reservation of government jobs provide a complete answer?

The attack on caste is not single - barrelled, concludes Lohia. It must be political as well as social.⁴¹

Lohia gives more importance to the political response because he gives primacy to the drawing of the nation's leadership from all the castes in the country. From this leadership would then come that revolution which would give to all, Indian society, Lohia hopes, the solidarity and reassurance now given to smaller groups by caste. In an economy where there is little to go around, very little in authority and even less in money, where the scramble is hard and farsight almost impossible, is group cohesiveness such as that provided by caste an inescapable need? Is there no way out? These questions, Lohia concludes, can only be resolved by opening up the country's political space to the lower castes.

These four thinkers give us an idea of the continuing debate on caste before the appearance of the Mandal Commission Report. It is necessary to know what each of them has to say because they tell us that we are not alone in our concern or alleviating caste backwardness, that our own response to problem is not the natural and inevitable one, and that there are, in fact, many more responses possible to the questions involved, other than our own.

The range of responses (from these four thinkers) to the problematic of caste can be briefly plotted along the following lines - Phule concerns himself with the construction of an alternative identity for the backward caste, that is, of creating a backward caste-combine out of a scattering of caste identities which could then play a

political role for itself. Phule's primary effort was to flesh out the cultural-ideological content of such an identity. **Gandhi** believed that the amelioration of the conditions of the Harijans was possible only through the the integrated effort of the **community** as a whole. Gandhi's constituency was not simply the lower castes; he addressed the whole community. The exploitation of the lower castes was a problem within the Hindu family which could be resolved only with the help of the upper castes. The cause of the Harijans must be owned by the whole community. Reform would only be possible by a change of heart of the savarnas. The State could only put the final seal on such a change.

Ambedkar and Lohia, on the other hand, share our modern-day faith in the State. For both, the State must be the instrument of change. The problem of the lower castes could not be left to the amorphous community. The issue was that of participation in power. Ambedkar clearly declares his priorities in the temple entry issue. Access to temples can wait - he seems to say. Access to power cannot. Thus, the socio/cultural/ideological revolution is not primary. It was necessary to give the lower castes a share in political power and the rest would follow. Lohia also shares Ambedkar's emphasis on the primacy of the political response to the lower-caste problems. He, too, identifies the State as the instrument which must be used to bring about reform - through reservations. But he also seems to show, more than

Ambedkar, an awareness of the inadequacy of such a policy if not supported by other measures.

For us today, Phule's emphasis on cultural-ideological formulation of identity, and Gandhi's reliance on the moral conscience of the community seems to be almost quixotic. We share, instead, with a comfortable familiarity, Lohia's and Ambedkar's faith in the state as the instrument of change, and their belief in the political arena as one where all issues must be brought up and resolved.

NOTES

1. Rosalind O'Hanlon, Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.62.
2. Ibid., p.62.
3. See, for example, Anil Seal, The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). A revealing set of figures given by seal for the year 1886-7, that of the caste of persons employed in the executive and judicial branches of the unconvanated service in the Bombay Presidency - the elite of the Indian administrative hierarchy - shows that of the 384 persons employed in this capacity, 328 were Hindus, of which 211 were Brahmans, 26 Kshatriyas, 37 Prabhus, 38 Vaishyas or Baniyas, 1 Sudra and 15 others. The categories used here confuse the jati with the varna grouping and are no doubt very crude, but the figures do give an indication of the relative proportion of Brahmans to Shudras, the category with which Phule would have been concerned. Seal, p.118.
4. This denunciation of the Brahmins forms part of an essay written by a 14-year old girl of the Mang caste who had studied with Phule for three years. It gives

a very valuable insight into Phule's ideas, Rosalind O'Hanlon, op. cit. p.120.

5. No copies of this play were thought to have survived until 1979, when three manuscript copies were found in the papers of P.S. Patil, the author of the first major biography written on Phule, published in 1927. The reference to the text of the play is taken from Rosalind O'Hanlon, op.cit., p.122.
6. Jotirao Phule, Slavery, D. Keer and S.G. Malshe (eds.), p.72. While Phule drew heavily on missionary and Orientalist accounts of ancient India for his description of these the struggles, and their survival in nineteenth - century culture, his derivation of the term 'Mahar' from maha-ari, 'great enemy', is his own.
7. Quoted from M.L. Gujral, Thus spake Bapu, or dialogues between Gandhis' spirit and the scribe, (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1985), p.33.
8. Ibid., p.29
9. Ibid., p.30
10. Ibid., p.30.
11. Dhananjay Keer, Mahatma Gandhi: Political Saint and Unarmed Prophet, (Bombay: Bombay Popular Prakashan, 1973), p.358.

12. M.L. Gujral, Thus spake Bapu; or dialogues between Gandhis' spirit and the scribe, (New Delhi: Gandhi peace Foundation, 1985), p.29.
13. Dhananjay Keer, *op.cit.*, p.358.
14. M.L. Gujral, *op.cit.*, p.30.
15. *Ibid.*, p.30.
16. *Ibid.*, p.31.
17. Dhananjay Keer, *op.cit.*, p.580.
18. Mahatma Gandhi, in *Harijan*, 23.9.39, p.280.
19. Quoted from Zaheer Hasan, Gandhiji and the Harijans.
20. See also the concept of 'Critical Traditionality' in Bhikhu Parekh, Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhis' Political Discourse, (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), pp.35,57,63,64,65,66,67,68,69,70,79, 82,97.
21. B.R. Ambedkar, "Who were the Shudras? How they come to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society", in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings And Speeches, Volume 7 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1990) pp.114-132.
22. Quoted from Keer, *op.cit.*, p.580.
23. Quoted from Keer, *op.cit.*, p.572.
24. Cited from Keer, *op.cit.*, p.578.

25. Quoted from Keer, op.cit., p.580.
26. Quoted from Keer, op.cit., p.580.
27. Ram Manohar Lohia, "The Two segregations of Caste And Sex," in The Caste System: Lohia, (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.1.
28. Ibid., p.1.
29. Ibid., p.1.
30. Ibid., p.2.
31. Ibid., p.1.
32. Ibid., p.4.
33. Ram Manohar Lohia, "Correspondence Regarding Backward classes Federation," in The Caste System: Lohia, (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.42.
34. Ibid., p.42.
35. Ram Manohar Lohia, "Caste and Shrinkage of Opportunities", in The Caste System: Lohia, (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.120.
36. Ibid., p.120.

37. Ram Manohar Lohia, "Towards the Destruction of Castes and Classes," in The Caste System, Lohia (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.100.
38. Ibid., p.101.
39. Ram Manohar Lohia, "Letter to a Sudra," in The Caste System: Lohia, (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.19.
40. Ram Manohar Lohia, "Towards the Destruction of Castes and Classes," in The Caste System: Lohia, (Hyderabad: Ram Manohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1964), p.84.
41. Ibid., p.85.

CHAPTER II

RESERVATION POLICY FOR THE BACKWARD CLASSES

- AN OVERVIEW

After Independence, the Indian State adopted a policy of compensatory discrimination for the backward castes. This policy comprises a wide array of schemes. This chapter makes a brief survey of the State's response to the problem of backward castes prior to the advent of the Mandal Commission Report. The State's policy of compensatory discrimination from 1947 onwards forms the background against which the setting up of the Mandal Commission and eventually the announcement of the National Front government regarding the partial implementation of the Report must be seen. These events also form the background against which the post-Mandal debate on caste can be analysed.

When Independence came in 1947, it brought with it the need to resolve to do away with structural inequalities in Indian society. This required the removal of casteism and untouchability. It was widely accepted at the time that caste would have no place in independent India. As power passed into Indian hands, the exclusion of Untouchables from public facilities and from Hindu temples was made a statutory offence. Reservations for Untouchables were also established in the central services and a programme of educational assistance was begun.

These programmes are authorised by constitutional provisions that permit departure from formal equality for

the purpose of favoring specified groups.¹ The constitutional support to such policies is provided by the following articles : **Article 46** a Directive Principle of State Policy which declares -- "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation."²

The Constitution's ban on discrimination in government employment is qualified by **Article 16(4)** which permits the State to make - "any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favor of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State."³ The general provisions banning discrimination by government (**Article 15(1)**) and banning discrimination in government - aided educational institutions (**Articles 29(2)**) are similarly qualified by article 15(4) which provides: "Nothing in Article 15 or Article 29(2) ... shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes."

These, along with specific provisions for reservations of seats in legislative bodies, are the core of the constitutional commitment to compensatory discrimination. The benefits of compensatory discrimination

have been extended to a wide array of groups. There are **three major classes** : First, there are those caste designated as **Scheduled Castes (SC)** on the basis of their 'untouchability'. They numbered nearly 80 million (14.6% of the population) according to the 1971 census. Second, there are the **Scheduled Tribes (ST)** who are distinguished by their tribal culture and physical isolation and many of whom are residents of specially protected Scheduled Areas. They numbered more than thirty eight million (6.9% of the population) in 1971. Third, the most controversial category, the Backward Classes, or as they are sometimes called, "**Other Backward Classes**". A heterogeneous category, varying greatly from state to state, comprised for the most part of castes (and some non-Hindu communities) low in the traditional social hierarchy, but not as low as the SC. It has been estimated that there were approximately 60 million persons under the OBC heading in 1961 - roughly the magnitude of the SC population at that time (64 million).⁴

Preferences are of three basic types : First, there are reservations, which allot or facilitate access to valued positions or resources. The most important instances of this type are reserved seats in legislatures, reservation of posts in government service, and reservation of places in academic institutions. Second, there are programmes involving expenditure or provision of services - e.g. - scholarships, grants, loans, land allotments, health care, legal aids, to a beneficiary group beyond comparable expenditure for other groups. Third, there are special

protections. These distributive schemes are accompanied by efforts to protect the Backward Classes from being exploited and victimised, for example, prohibition of forced labor.

Of these measures, the ones that have generated the most controversy and achieved the most prominence are reservations in government jobs. This is especially in evidence when the beneficiaries involved belong to the OBC category - a far more controversial and heterogeneous category than that of the SC and ST. The Mandal Commission Report with its recommendation of 27% reservation of government jobs for the OBC (among other recommendations) brought the replay on the national stage of all the questions and perplexities which afflict policies of compensatory discrimination, especially the reservation of government jobs.

The **'Other Backward Classes'** for whom preferential treatment is authorised are not defined in the constitution, nor is any exclusive method or agency for their designation provided. For all the uncertainty surrounding the term 'Scheduled Caste' and its predecessor, 'Depressed Classes', its central purpose is clear: to identify the victims of 'untouchability'. At the time of Independence, the term 'Backward Classes' had a less fixed or definite reference. But the term had been in existence around for some time. It had a variety of referents, it had shifted rapidly in meaning, and it had come to mean different things in different places.⁵ Some instances of the varied meanings

attached to the term are cited by Galanter. 'Backward Classes' first acquired a technical meaning in the princely state of Mysore. In 1918, the Mysore government appointed a committee to enquire into the question of encouraging members of the 'backward communities' in public service. In 1921, preferential recruitment of backward communities was instituted, and they were defined as "all communities other than Brahmins, who are not adequately represented in the public service."

The United Provinces Hindu Backward Classes League (founded in 1929) submitted a memorandum which suggested that the term 'depressed' carried a connotation "of untouchability in the sense of causing pollution by touch as in the case of Madras and Bombay" and that many communities were reluctant to identify themselves as depressed. The League suggested the term 'Hindu Backward' as a more suitable nomenclature. The list of one hundred and fifteen castes submitted included all candidates for the untouchable category as well as a stratum above. In Madras and elsewhere, the term 'Backward Classes' was used to refer to the strata above the Untouchables. The Madras Provincial Backward Classes league, consisting of the less forward non-Brahmin communities was founded in 1934 for the purpose of securing separate treatment from "the forward non-Brahmin communities." In November 1947, separate reservations in the Madras services were provided for these "Backward Hindus."

These definitional disputes are not without political significance as these involve the question of self-respect and identity. No wonder the term never acquired a definite meaning at the all-India level, though it had definite, if different meanings in local contexts.

Two major forms of usage may however be discerned: (1) as the more inclusive group of all those who need special treatment and (2) as a stratum higher than the untouchables but nonetheless depressed. This double usage continues till today : the former in the usage of backward classes in the wide sense (including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes); the latter in the usage equivalent is "other Backward Classes".

Since the inception of the constitution of free India, the reservation policy for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes has been, by and large, a nationally accepted programme for their upliftment. But, due to the absence of any centrally identifiable characteristics such as social segregation and spatial isolation as found in the case of SC's and ST's the Other Backward Classes have constituted an 'unorganised sector' of the reservation policy.⁶ Due to the absence of a centralized reservation policy for the OBC, the initiative rests with the state governments and some states such as West Bengal, Assam, states of the North East, Rajasthan or any of the Union Territories do not have any reservation provisions for them. It has been only since the mid-seventies that electoral

pressures prompted the states of North India and Gujarat to extend the benefits of reservation to them.⁷ Among the states which follow the system reservation for the OBC's the percentage of reservation granted to them varies between 10% in Gujarat to 50% in Karnataka.⁸ Unlike the states of South India where the reservation policy has evolved over a long period of time and has reached a "saturation point" with a comprehensive system of quotas in virtually every sphere of public life,⁹ the anti-reservation agitations which began in the late 1970s in Bihar and spread to other parts of the country were a consequence of the introduction of measures similar to those of the Southern states and they succeeded in raising the basic issue of validity of provisions of preferential treatment for the weaker sections.

The origin of the various reservation system for the Backward Classes as an outcome of the non-Brahmin movements in the South is explicable by the major structural disturbances that the traditional social order underwent as a result of British rule. The traditional ordering of the Hindu social system is said to be along the lines of caste which more or less corresponded to the political and economic hierarchies.¹⁰ The correspondence of higher occupation and ritual status with political power and economic strength, which meant mainly land in colonial India, would mean that there existed a considerable correlation between caste and class at the empirical level.

The introduction of western liberal education, the emergence of egalitarian ideas of Justice and Equality, and the development of modern communication networks under British rule, accentuated the disparities in the distribution of economic and political power particularly in regard to the upper and intermediate castes.¹¹ The Brahmins, particularly in South India, were the first to respond to western rural education and were successful in converting their landed sources into more rewarding avenues of government service and professions.¹²

It has been pointed out by N.Ram that in the Madras province, the 'literati' class of Brahmins began "moving into key positions as officials, professors, lower bureaucrats, writers, lawyers and editors,"¹³ and there exists considerable evidence about the extraordinary privileges they began to acquire from the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, by the turn of the century, the male literacy rate among Tamil and Telugu Brahmins was 73.62 per cent in comparison to 6.9 percent of the Vellalas who later played a prominent role in the non-Brahmin movement that clearly manifested the Brahmin - non - Brahmin cleavage by the second decade of the twentieth century.¹⁴

In a pattern similar to the experience of the Madras province, 68 percent of the Mysore Brahmins were literate by the turn of the century in comparison to a literacy rate 14% percent among the Lingayats and Vokkaligas who, like the

leading castes of the non-Brahmin movement Madras, possessed the important source of land.¹⁵

The Brahmin - non Brahmin cleavage that appeared in Madras, Mysore and Bombay is significant with regard to the policy of special treatment for the Backward Classes because the leading castes, of the non-Brahmin movements who controlled landed resources and belonged to the economically powerful sections were the first beneficiaries of the schemes of reservation that began to emerge in the days of the freedom struggle. This cleavage also explains the reasons for the comprehensive system of reservations that exist in the South till today, in contrast to the North where such a divide did not occur. The North, unlike the South, experienced a different kind of cleavage - between the 'twice-born and forward castes', of Kshatriyas, Bhumihars, Kayasthas and Rajputs on the one hand, and the intermediate castes such as Ahirs and Kurmis on the other.¹⁶

There are therefore, important regional variations in respect of adherence to a policy of reservation for the backward castes. Marc Galanter divides the states into 'three contiguous groupings.'¹⁷ First, there is what we might call the peninsular bloc comprising the four Dravidian states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu) and Maharashtra. In these states, the Backward Classes categories have a long history descending from pre-Independence arrangements; there are a wide range of benefits, and (except in Maharashtra) a major segment of

the population - from 38% to 55% is included, and a major segment of scarce opportunities are reserved for them. In stark contrast is the eastern - middle band, stretching across India from Assam in the Northeast through West Bengal and Orissa, across Madhya Pradesh to Rajasthan (Gujarat has moved, according to Galanter, from this category to a pattern like that of Maharashtra). In these states, there is no significant use of the Other Backward Classes category. The northern tier of states displays an intermediate pattern. Jammu and Kashmir, with its history of communal quotas, resembles the southern pattern. The admixture of geographical criteria there is also found in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh along with the use of communal categories. Bihar, like Jammu and Kashmir, approximates the peninsular pattern. The Backward Classes are selected on a communal basis and make up a sizable portion of the population, but the benefits have not been as extensive as in the South.

The state patterns have been varied with respect to the determination of the policy of compensatory discrimination especially reservation.

There have also been attempts, over the years, to centralise the reservation policy. The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed in January 1953 with Kaka Saheb Kalelkar as chairman. It had the following terms of reference :

- a) Determining the criteria for considering whether any sections of the people within the territory of India

(in addition to SCs and STs) should be treated as Socially and Educationally Backward Classes, and in accordance with such criteria preparing a list of such classes setting out also their approximate numbers and territorial distribution.

- b) Investigating the condition of all such classes and the difficulties under which they labour and recommending steps to be taken by the union or states to remove such difficulties or improve their condition and the grants to be made for the purpose by the union or states and the conditions subject to which such grants should be made.

The commission's report was submitted in March 1955. After sifting and sorting facts, it adopted four criteria of defining backwardness - i) Low social position in the traditional caste hierarchy. ii) Lack of general educational advancement among the major section of a caste/community. iii) Inadequate or no representation in govt. service and iv) Inadequate representation in trade, commerce and industry.

The Commission listed as many as 2399 castes/communities as backward with 837 of them as most backward. For the advancement of these communities it made several recommendations, in particular, reservation of atleast 25% jobs in class I, 33.3% in class 2, and 40% in

classes 3 and 4 for OBC candidates, and 70% seats in all technical and professional institutions for OBC students.

Five of the commission members submitted their dissenting notes. Of the three who strongly opposed linking caste with backwardness and reservations in govt. service, one apprehended that far from freezing, reservations would strengthen caste and social divisions, retard social cohesion, and culminate in disaster. Another member feared that apart from injecting the caste virus into the body politic, reservations will help only the advanced sections among the backward. The third member held that while caste as a pathological condition of the society cannot be ignored, it should not be allowed to be used as a source for drawing benefits from the State.

In what amounted to a volte-face, the chairman himself repudiated the commission's work in his letter forwarding the report. Stating that the realisation that the remedies suggested were worse than the evil dawned on him almost towards the end of the commissions work, he asserted that he was definitely against reservations in government service for any community. He recommended that backwardness be measured by residential, economic, educational and cultural criteria.¹⁸ The memorandum on the commission's report laid before the Parliament along with the report in September 1956 by G.B. Pant Minister for Home Affairs was highly critical. Among other things it stated that for the inquiry contemplated in article 340, the commission had to

find indisputable yardsticks by which social and educational backwardness could be measured and that far from being unanimous, its report revealed considerable divergence of opinion.

Thus, the commission failed to find "positive and workable" criteria, said the critique from the Minister of Home Affairs, and "further investigations will have to be undertaken so that the deficiencies that have been noticed in the findings of the commission are made good and the problem is solved with due regard to the requirements of Art. 340. The state governments were requested to undertake adhoc surveys to determine the numbers of Backward Classes and in the meantime to "give all reasonable facilities" to the Backward classes in accordance with then existing lists and also to such other who in their opinion deserve to be considered as socially and educationally backward in the existing circumstances."¹⁹ Thus the matter went back to the states; the commission's report remained on the table, and in spite of occasional agitations it was not taken up by Parliament until 1965. In 1965, when the report was finally discussed in Parliament, the Central Government's spokesman firmly reiterated its opposition to communal criteria. Caste criteria were not only administratively unworkable it said, but were contrary to the "first principle of social justice" in their unfairness to the other poor. They were contrary to the Constitution, would perpetuate caste, and would create in the recipients both vested interests and a

sense of helplessness. The centre endorsed economic criteria, but refrained from enforcing it on the states, preferring the 'path of persuasion'. Eight states were said to have adopted the economic criterion.²⁰ Meanwhile, in May 1961, the cabinet had also decided that no national list of Other Backward Classes should be drawn up and the states were informed that in the view of the government of India, "it was better to apply economic tests than to go by caste."²¹

Consequently the Kalelkar report was not taken up for implementation and the issue apparently was laid to rest.

The problem of devising a government policy which would acknowledge the Other Backward Castes and respond to their special needs/demands was raised time and again, for example, by the Socialist Party led by Lohia in the 60s.

The hegemony of the Congress being challenged in the sixties and the increasing political assertion of the backward castes who had taken advantage of the Green Revolution and acquisition of the land rendered surplus by the land reforms helped in the emergence of backward castes as a potential support base for the opposition. Reservations for the Other Backward Castes was accepted as a necessary imperative by all the opposition parties which constituted the Janata party. It formed a part of its election manifesto. "The Janata party believes that the disparities that separate these members of our society from the more

educationally and economically advanced sections cannot be radically reduced without a policy of special treatment in their favour. It will accordingly provide preferential opportunities for education and self employment to these sections. In this connection, it will reserve between 25 and 33 percent of all appointments to government service for the backward classes as recommended by the Kalelkar Commission".²²

When the Janata party came to power, however, instead of implementing the recommendations of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission as promised in its manifesto, it thought it expedient to order a fresh investigation into the conditions of the Backward Classes. The second Backward classes commission was appointed under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal on 20 december, 1978

It was constituted to "determine the criteria for defining the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes" and to "recommend steps to be taken for the advancement of the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes so identified". It was also to "examine the desirability or otherwise of making provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of such backward classes of citizens which are not adequately represented in public services or posts in connection with the affairs of the union or any states."²³

The Commission noted that though caste was a valid indicator of backwardness, it could not be the sole criteria for determining it. To decide the indices of backwardness, a dozen castes well known for their social and educational backwardness were chosen, various indicators tried out and finally some selected for determining backwardness. These were of three kinds. Each of the indicators were given a weightage i.e. Social indicators-3 points, Educational - 2 points and Economic - 1 point, all totalling 22 points. Any caste whose total weightage was more than 11 points was classified as socially and educationally backward for that state. On the basis of these indicators and surveys 3743 castes were declared as backward. The total population of Hindu and non-Hindu backward castes added upto 52% of the country's population according to the report. The Commission made various recommendations. While it also recommended measures such as an intensive time-bound programme for adult education and radical land reform, it is only those relating to reservation in government jobs that have gained prominence. These are mainly: 27% reservation to OBCs; candidates selected on merit on basis of open competition not be adjusted against their reservation quota; reservation to be made available to promotional quota at all levels. The Commission recommended that the proposed system of reservation should be applied in toto to all recruitment to central and state governments and to public sector undertakings, all nationalised banks, all private undertakings receiving financial assistance from the

government and all university and affiliated colleges.²⁴

The Mandal Commission Report, was submitted on December 31, 1980 but no action was taken for a decade. The implementation of the report did, however, figure on the agenda of opposition politics especially the Janata party in its various incarnations and the Janata Dal. The Janata Dal election manifesto of 1989 specifically mentioned the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report as a priority of the party.

However, when Prime Minister V.P.Singh in a suo moto statement in Parliament on 7th August, 1990 announced the government's decision to implement the Mandal Report, most people were taken by surprise. What is significant also is that V.P. Singh decided to begin implementing the Mandal Commissions' recommendations by reserving 27% of the central government and central public sector jobs for the OBC's and not the other steps - literacy drives, special educational measures, assistance to become entrepreneurs, professionals and to ply their traditional crafts more successfully - prescribed to overcome the social, educational and other backwardness of the OBCs. Nor did he include measures like land reforms. There has been therefore a lot of speculation over a) the motives of V.P.Singh in taking up the report in general and b) it's particular timing.

Though the announcement of the implementation of the report can probably be explained by the logic of opposition

politics of the previous decade, the immediate political context also has a bearing on the decision of the JD government. In an article in the Indian Express of August 22, 1990²⁵ Neerja Choudhari mentions 3 factors which influenced the timing of V.P. Singh's decision. The first was the rally staged in Delhi on Aug 9, 1990 by Devi Lal, Deputy PM and Minister for Agriculture in V.P.Singh's Government to assert his strength in the wake of his removal from the Union Cabinet on August 1. By announcing his decision on reservation, V.P.Singh wanted to wean away the backward castes from Devi Lal and delink them from the Jats who constituted Charan Singh's sole power base which Devi Lal was trying to take over. It was part therefore of various moves and countermoves in the power struggle within the party. The second factor and the most important factor was that the reservation announcement was meant to neutralise the RSS-BJP-VHP campaign for a Rama temple at the site of the Babri masjid at Ayodhya. The approach of the VHP's extended deadline of Oct 30, 1990 for a negotiated settlement of the matter and the prospect of the VHP starting the construction of the temple after its expiry had been causing grave anxiety to the National Front government. The third factor was, says Choudhary, V.P. Singh's desire to convey his readiness to go for a mid-term poll if it came to that. He wanted to take on his adversaries in the party and as a part of that make it clear to his adversaries in the party that he was prepared to go to the hustings if there was no other way.

The announcement triggered massive and wide spread protest. There was large scale violence in Bihar, UP, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, the Union Territories of Delhi and Chandigarh, Rajasthan, MP, Gujarat and Orissa and protests on a lower scale and intensity in AP and Karnataka. About 100 persons were killed in police firing and the clashes. Government property including railways, postal and telephone installations and state transport corporation buses suffered extensive damage. The most tragic aspect of the agitation was the wave of attempts at protest suicides mostly by young students. While most set themselves on fire, some hanged themselves or consumed poison. According to one estimate the number of these attempts exceeded 150 by October, 1990.²⁶ In a very large measure, the spread and fury of the agitation was due to the anger caused by the self-immolations and the governments refusal to budge from its decision inspite of these.

The agitation was centred in urban India involving students from upper and middle class families. It was rife with casteist and anti SC/ST symbols and slogans and backed by the media especially the elite English press which often attacked the very idea of positive discrimination including reservations.

A national consensus on the issue of reservation for the OBC can only be a remote possibility because of the historical trends and political impulsions that have shaped the policy. A survey of the major developments in the

reservation policy clearly shows that the southern states have higher quotas of reservation for the OBC primarily due to the social movements that shaped the policy. As regards the efforts to centralise the policy i.e. through the setting up of the first Backward Classes Commission and the second Backward Classes Commission, not much success has been achieved. While the Kaka Kalelkar report was not taken up for implementation at all, the government order announcing the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission Report has provoked widespread agitation and protest. It is in this background that the political parties articulate their positions on the Mandal Commission Report. While this chapter has briefly outlined the State's response to the issue of social justice for the backward castes upto the coming of the Mandal Commission report. The next two chapters shall deal with the response of the political parties to the issue in post-Mandal times.

NOTES

1. Marc Galanter uses the term 'compensatory discrimination' to describe the various policies that fall under the purview of special treatment programmes, because the term implies that some sections of Society are left out and historical deprivation and present handicaps of the weaker sections are sought to be 'offset' by means of inclusions and recompensations.

M.Galanter, Competing Equalities, Law and the Backward Classes of India, (Delhi Oxford, 1984), p.2.

2. The Directive Principles of State Policy, contained in Part IV of the constitution, are not themselves justiciable, but the Constitution prescribes it as "the duty of the state to apply these principles in making laws" (Art.37).
3. In addition, Article 335 provides : "The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making appointments to service and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of the State.
4. Cited from Galanter, op.cit., pp.42,43.

5. As the term Backward Classes has had a variety of referents, Marc Galanter derives ten different denotations on the basis of the variety of meanings it acquired since the pre-Independence days, Galanter, 1984, op.cit. p.185. Also see Galanter, "who are the other Backward classes - An introduction to a constitutional puzzle", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.13, Nos. 43 and 44, October 1978, pp.1812-28.
6. D.L. Sheth, "Reservation Policy Revisited". Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 22, No. 46, November 14, 1987, p.157.
7. Ibid, p.1958.
8. The Hindu (Madras), September 16, 1986.
9. The reservations for the OBCs in the four south Indian states are 50% in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, 40% in Kerala and 25% in Andhra Pradesh, Mahesh Dave, "Backward Classes and Reservation" in Haroobhi Mehta and Hasmukh Patel, ed. Dynamics of Reservations Policy, (New Delhi, Patriot, 1985), p.97, (Table 2).
10. R.K. Hebsur, "Reactions to the Reservations for Other Backward Classes", in Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Second Part, (Delhi-Government of India), 1980, p.142.
11. Ibid., p.143.

12. Ibid., p.147.
13. N.Ram, "Dravidian Movement in its, Pre-Independence Phases", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. nos. 7&8, 1980, p.377.
14. R.K. Hebsur, "Tamil Nadu : From the non Brahmin Movement to Tamil Revivalism" in Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Second Part, (Delhi, Government of India), 1980, p.142.
15. R.K. Hebsur, "Karnataka : A two stages backward classes movement", in Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980, op.cit., p.151.
16. In this context, M.S. Rao classifies Backward Classes movements on the basis of the goals they seek, support base and extent and nature of relative deprivation. In Madras, Karnataka and Maharashtra, movements had their aim of reducing the domination of Brahmins in politics and profession and in the North, the cleavage emerged between the generally forward and twice-born castes of Brahmin, Bhumihar, Kayastha, Rajputs on the one hand and the intermediate castes of Ahirs, Kurmis and Yadavs on the other. For details, see : M.S.A. Rao, "Social Movements in India", (Delhi, Manohar, 1976) vol.1.
17. Marc Galanter, Completing Equalities, Law and the Backward Classes of India, (Delhi : Oxford, 1984),

p.81.

18. Cited from Galanter, op.cit. p.172.
19. Cited from Galanter, op.cit. p.173.
20. The list included Gujarat, Maharashtra, Punjab, Orissa, Assam, West Bengal, Mysore and Andhra Pradesh - from Galanter, op.cit., p.178.
21. Ministry of Home Affairs, 1961. Galanter, op.cit., p.176.
22. From the Election Manifesto of Janata Party, 1977 (New Delhi, 1977).
23. Mandal Commission Report, n.l, p.vii.
24. Mandal Commission Report, n.l., p.58.
25. Neeraja Chowdhury, "Decision to implement Mandal Report : Political parties in a fix", Indian Express, Delhi edition, August 22, 1990.
26. Hiranmay Karlekar, "In the Mirror of Mandal, Social Justice, Caste, Class and the Individual," Delhi Ajanta, 1992), p.2.

CHAPTER III

PARTY POSITIONS I - JANATA DAL AND THE LEFT

Along with the BJP-led upsurge of Hindu Revivalism, the empowerment of the backward castes is the most crucial issue in Indian politics today. It has opened up space for new kinds of political contentions and confrontations. Old issues like secularism or communalism, democracy, rights of states vis-a-vis the centre, questions of national identity or nationalism will now have to be thought and sorted out in the changed political context.

The announcement of the partial implementation of the Mandal Commission Report has initiated a new debate on questions of empowerment, equity and social justice. Political parties are both the initiators of and respondents to this debate. Parties do not simply represent the will of the people in a democratic polity such as ours but also manipulate this will and act as the vital mediating agency which helps to translate the unaggregated will of the people into purposive state action. Parties should not be conceived as simply part of the representational structure of parliamentary government, contesting votes and seats, articulating and aggregating prevailing divisions in society. The real contribution of the party system to political development lies in its role of being a catalyst of government performance at various levels; parties do not simply compete and represent but also turn competitive

arenas and representational processes into resources for and against government.¹

When the V.P. Singh government announced the implementation of the proposals for reservations for the Other Backward Castes, all the major political parties were forced to redefine their positions not only on reservations but also the related issues of caste and social justice for the backward castes. This chapter and the next investigate the positions of the five major political parties: the Janata Dal, the Left parties Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), the Congress (I) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This has been done through a survey of their manifestoes, resolutions and statements published after the August 7 government order on the mandal commission report. This study concentrates only on official party documents and statements of these parties.

The position that a political party takes on any issue may be studied by two methods. Firstly one may attempt to analyse the party position through what the party has to say in its manifesto, its official resolution and other documents and statements. Secondly one may attempt an analysis of the everyday practice of the political parties. This study is based on the following premises; that the analysis of manifestoes, documents, resolutions and statements of political parties forms a legitimate method of studying the parameters of the contemporary debate

between political parties on caste and social justice. The aim of this study is to identify the main questions that are raised in this debate and the responses of the political parties to these questions. Party manifestoes and other official documents are often and unfairly dismissed as mere rhetoric, unrelated to actual party practice. This is not entirely true. There are differences admittedly in what the party says and what it does and this may constitute an independent area of study. The political significance of the party's commitment to the written word of its policies and goals cannot however be underestimated. While the political practice is diffuse and often too elusive to be useful as the raw data for any theory - building enterprise, the manifesto and documents of political parties are more easily amenable to political analysis. The written word in a public statement also demands a degree of rigour and commitment from the party that is easily avoided in the area of practice. It follows, then that what the political parties say in their manifestoes, official documents and statements and what they do not say, can be treated as a valid subject of political analysis.

Any analysis of the positions that the political parties articulate on caste and social justice in the Mandal debate must take into account the following factors. Phule and Gandhi explored the possibility of reform at the level of the formation of the caste identity as a cultural ideological construct. The Mandal debate on caste reflects,

on the other hand the priority of the need for political representation in power structures, especially the pressing need for providing greater opportunities in government services to the backward castes. This emphasis constitutes a break with the concerns of Phule and Gandhi. The present emphasis on participation in the power structure can be located in the political thinking of Ambedkar and Lohia who emphasized reservation as a necessary measure for bringing about social justice. The most important aspect of the contemporary debate on caste is the centrality accorded to State intervention. The problem of the backward or under privileged castes is essentially addressed as a question to the state.

The State's response to such a question may take two forms. It may respond in the form of either (a) schemes of distributive justice, for example, programmes of economic help, granting of loans etc etc., or (b) providing access to participation in State power itself, through reservation in government jobs.

It is the latter kind of response that is the controversial one. In this context, it is important to note that the kind of state response to the caste problem becomes a contentious issue only in the case of the OBCs. In the case of the SC/ST, a wide consensus prevails regarding both schemes of distributive justice and reservation in govt. jobs.

The reasons for such a consensus could be any or all of the followings : Firstly the special measures and reservation of jobs for SC/STs have been a historical legacy of the freedom struggle for post-Independent India, unlike the OBC - issue which is a new one, atleast at the national/central level. Secondly, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes are so obviously oppressed and exploited that it would be difficult for the political parties not to take it up as an issue. The plight of the OBC on the other hand is more ambiguous. Thirdly, the loud expostulating for special measures for the SC/STs also helps the political parties to cover their silence on the problem of the OBCs until the Mandal issue brings this problem to the forefront. Finally, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes do not form an appreciably large percentage of the population. The OBCs, on the other hand do. Therefore, any policy of preferential treatment to the OBCs is likely to create much more conflict than a similar policy for the SCs/STs.

Another factor which must be kept in mind while assessing the role of political parties as protagonists in a debate of any kind is that political parties, by their very nature as contenders for governmental power in a democratic system, are always obliquely or directly, addressing their voters in the coming election. While Phule or Gandhi, never having been contenders for governmental power, could address issues free from this constraint, political parties are caught in a dilemma peculiar to electoral democratic

politics. In elections to all types of representative bodies, one's own caste and community, or of a group of allied castes' (KHAM, AJGAR and so forth) provides an easily accessible vote bank and a power base. Therefore, the pragmatic tendency of parties and groups is to rely on this, to appeal to it. Calculations are made while putting up candidates, and conducting election propoganda. This applies equally to the upper, the middle and the lower castes. Against the 'casteism' of the upper castes, a sort of inverted casteism of the lower castes is set in motion. But, there is also a bit of a contradiction here. The democratic election appeal itself, as also the pressing need to gather additional votes, requires a multicaste approach. Thus, the two contradictory processes - the first operating below the surface and the second above, go together. Such is the nature of politics - of adult franchise and a democratic system - operating in a caste milieu such as ours. Besides, while assessing the position that a political party takes on caste (or for that matter on any other issue) - it is necessary to see it in the backdrop of the party's self-imaging or commitment to a few main ideological principles.

With these considerations in mind, we may approach the political parties one by one. This chapter shall deal with the - Janata Dal and the parties of the Left while the next and final chapter shall take up the positions of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress (I).

JANATA DAL

It is only appropriate to begin with the Janata Dal. It was the Janata Dal which revived the Mandal Commission Report which had been ignored since it was submitted to Parliament in 1980, and pushed the issue of caste and social justice for the backward castes to the top of the national agenda. The Janata Dal is the initiator of post-Mandal debate on caste.

Why did the Janata Dal cast its eye on a report which had been stoutly ignored by all political parties so far? Why did it bring into the national spotlight an issue which had been left to the mercy of the state governments - from which the centre had kept well and safely away ?

The Janata Dal, unlike the Congress or the Left parties, or even the BJP - did not have a constituency of its own. Anti-congressism by itself would not last long. It needed, therefore, an issue or a plank on which to build its claim for power. The cause of the Other Backward Castes provides the Dal with just such an issue for mobilizing mass support.

Except for the likely persistence of a relatively strong support base for the BJP, and the hold of the Left front in areas where they are politically strong, very little can be said for the large area hitherto occupied by centrist politics. The decline in the electoral fortunes of the Congress (I) which had till then occupied this space,

began in 1980 with the first phase of liberalization. In a third-world country with widespread poverty, the state must control a large part of the surplus if social problems are to be handled democratically. This is something the Congress is bartering away in great haste.² Now, with the liberalization of economy, more so vis-a-vis international finance capital, and IMF conditionalities, the State will find it more and more difficult to provide relief to the people. Discontent within the peasantry due to the reduction in subsidies and among the youth due to the contraction of job opportunities, may become pronounced.

It is precisely at this juncture that the Janata Dal reformulated its political agenda in order to assert its claim to the centrist space left vacant by the decline of the Congress. In fact, between the 1989 and 1991 electoral platforms, the Janata Dal became two different parties.³ It transformed its slogan from 'anti-corruption' to that of 'anti-elitism'. This change was dictated primarily by the need to widen its platform. With the Congress now a part of the market, there is a need for a centrist party which can speak at the national level for the poor and those marginalized by the market.

This is not to say that the Janata Dal's espousal of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report for reservations of government jobs for the Other Backward Castes truly represents the voice of the oppressed. While the Mandal proposals may be taken as the starting point for

the aggregation of the demands of the backward castes at the national level, the appropriate form and content of such a policy has still to be worked out. All that may be said for certain is that the Janata Dal displays sound political acumen in taking note of and responding to the crisis of pluralism in our polity today. Pluralism is not always a liability. It can also be an asset. It appears to be a liability, however, only if there is acute economic crisis and resource, crunch and also when justice is not done to particular ethnic or religious groups. Most ethnic, religious and caste movements in modern India are essentially struggling for their just share in political power and economic sources or retention of privileges already enjoyed. The crisis generated by the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report by the V.P. Singh government may be seen in this light.⁴

Another factor that could explain the Janata Dal's raising of the Mandal issue at this particular juncture is BJP's propagation of the politics of Mandir. The August 7 announcement may also be seen as the brandishing of the 'Mandal Card' against the 'Mandir Card' i.e. the Janata Dal's alternative to the politics of Mandir was the politics of Mandal and it was assumed that the secular agenda of social justice would effectively counter the religious agenda of Mandir.⁵ But whatever the reason behind the move it cannot be denied that the Mandal report has changed the very shape of politics in India for a long time to come.

What does the Janata Dal have to say on the issue ? The party states its commitment to the cause of the Other Backward Castes in the following manner : "National Front is committed to erasing all manner of social inequalities."⁶ It believes that the party and its allies have emerged as the focus of the growing unity of all the backwards and dalits, the minorities and the enlightened groups among the intelligentsia and that its unity with the working masses is an event of great political significance.⁷ The Janata Dal also claims that "a new polarization between the forces of progress and radical change represented by our alliance on the one hand, and the anti-people forces opposed to radical change and progress like the Congress (I), JD (S) and BJP in the other is fast emerging."⁸ It also defines itself as the party which, when in power, strove "with uncompromising zeal to liberate the poor and the weak from their socio-economic shackles and simultaneously to correct the structural perversions which the democratic polity suffered under the Congress rule. The Janata Dal makes it clear that it shall fight both the Congress and the BJP and that it regards both as adversaries in its effort to "redirect the course of India's development" and to reconstruct the system on a more 'decentralized' and 'truly federal basis'.⁹

The appeal inherent in these statements and phrases such as "reconstruction of the socio-political system", "redirect the course of India's development", "radical change progress", forms the backdrop against which the Janata Dal raises the problem of the Other Backward Castes.

How, then, does the Janata Dal, having identified itself as the harbinger of social justice, perceive the problem of the Other Backward Castes ?

"The issue is one of empowerment"¹⁰ says the Janata Dal. The Janata Dal is very clear that the social and educational backwardness of the Other Backward Castes must be seen as a political problem with an obvious political solution : it sees the depressed classes as those who had lost a "political battle" thousands of years ago. Till today, the result of that political battle have not been reversed, it says. Therefore, "it is not the question of the treasury but it is the question of the throne. One who occupies the throne will also control the treasury. Gone are the days when we used to give doles to the poor from the treasury. He is not fighting for doles He is fighting the last battle for his dignity and to live like human being."¹¹

The Janata Dal states that the time for schemes of distributive justice is long over. Today, the oppressed do not need help. They demand, rather, the power to help themselves. "We will have to eradicate the system where we are always the donors and the poor remain receivers. This relationship of donors and receivers will have to be replaced by a feeling of brotherhood."¹²

The problem, therefore, according to Janata Dal is one of access to State power. These statements, are informed

by a shift in the conception of state. The Indian state, as it was conceived by our constitution - framers was to be a neutral space, a secular arbiter between the demands of and conflicts between India's plural identities. The Janata Dal now takes hold of the state and from its vantage point above civil society - brings it down to an earth riven and segmented by caste divisions. The state cannot keep itself aloof from this division - the Janata Dal seems to say. It must, in fact, reflect these divisions.

To say that the earlier conception of the state saw it as a neutral, secular arbiter in communal conflicts is not to say that this was actually the case, infact. The state took sides, of course, but always surreptitiously, never openly. What the Janata Dal seems to be advocating is that the official stance also be given up and that the state openly and professedly reflect caste divisions in society. "The voice of the government will be the voice of such homes and the voice of peasants workers and youth. If power is a sword, then it will be wielded on behalf of the poor toiling masses...."¹³

Thus, what is sought to be discarded is not so much the reality but the the ideal of all the many divisions in our society dissolving into equality and unity in the halted space of the state. A new state is to be given birth to with the Janata Dal acting as midwife - one which replicates the divisions in society - one which maintains a precarious balance of power between them.

V.P. Singh makes a statement in the Rajya Sabha in which he further state his ideal of empowerment for the poor. In this statement, he calls for the reservation of 40% seats in the Rajya Sabha, Lok Sabha and the Assemblies for the 'poor'. He explicates his position further by giving the example of a skewed representation of castes in the bureaucracy. "The backward classes constitute 52% of our population but in the government jobs its representation is only 14.5% and among the class I officers this is only 4.55. How long will this injustice continue. We shall have to do justice.¹⁴

A crucial question that comes up in this context is - which of the many identities in India are to be allowed participation in power and which to be left out ? Obviously, in a land of so many identities, all cannot be accommodated. And almost every kind of identity - whether it be based on region, religion, or language can stake a claim to power along with caste if this principle were to be followed.

Another charge that the Janata Dal must answer is that if, for example, a backward caste identity is made the basis of participation in power, would it not create vested interests in the perpetuation of such backwardness? The role of power as the soldifier of such an identity cannot be ignored.

The basic question which underlies all the above questions is: How does the Janata Dal see caste-groups - particularly disadvantaged caste groups ? And the answer is - as contenders for state power. Thus, it does not seriously address itself to the need for attacking the other reasons of such backwardness - the belief system which gives it legitimacy. On the other hand, it treats the backward castes as another claimant for power. The fight is to be carried out, vis-a-vis these groups and state power.

The Janata Dal is nothing if not consistent in its world-view, however. On the issue of backwardness of women, it suggests a familiar way out. In spite of their great contribution, says the Janata Dal, they have no role in running the country. How can a nation, it asks, vibrate with life if women who are the source of life remain suffocated? Therefore, "we have decided to make a beginning by giving them their share in power. In this very session, a bill is being tabled in Parliament to provide for 30% seats for women in Panchayati Raj."¹⁵

This approach, thus, contains two basic assumptions: (a) a reading of all backwardness as the result of lost political battles. and (b) that the alleviation of backwardness is only possible through participation in power.

Another illustration of these convictions may be found in the following : "Our adivasis who live in forests

and wastelands far from Delhi have become the forgotten poor of our society fit only for exploitation. |The voice of these people must be heard in Delhi."¹⁶ Backwardness, for the Janata Dal, finds a ready (and only partly metaphorical) translation in distance from Delhi.

The Janata Dal's emphasis on reservation as a means of providing participation in power and not as a measure of economic upliftment was meant to counter the chorus of almost all other political parties that reservation be provided only to the economically backward. It holds this position most of the time.

But there are times when, pushed on the defensive by allegations of casteism, it invokes the economic-uplift' theory too for protection. "The firm policy adopted by the National Front government to provide preferential employment opportunities to the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes has the potential to ameliorate the economic conditions of these oppressed section of society."¹⁷

Finally, to conclude this analysis of the Janata Dal's position, a short comment on the kind of statistics and figures that is uses to support its contentions. These statistics and figures may almost be a summary of the way the party approaches the problem of backward castes. "In 1980, although Brahmins constitute 5.4% of the population, 50% of the governors, 54% secretaries to governor, 53% Union Cabinet Ministers, 54% Chief Secretaries, 62% Secretaries,

additional secretaries and Joint Secretaries, 51% Vice Chancellors, 56% Supreme Court Judges, 41.5% Ambassadors, and 57% Chief Executives in Central Public Sector Organisations were all Brahmins"¹⁸

The Janata Dal's answer to the two questions (a) what kind of a critique may be made of the caste system today and (b) what must be the measures that could form a programme of social justice and which agency would implement such a programme, would be along the following lines:

As for the first the Janata Dal allies itself so strongly to the cause of the Other Backward Castes, that it does not even attempt to seriously take up the caste system as a whole for critical appraisal. It makes almost no effort to investigate the origin, and persistence of the system as a whole. The Janata Dal sees caste as a political category. It perceives the backwardness of the backward castes as the result of political backwardness, i.e. - resulting from 'lost political battles'. The ideological cultural roots of this backwardness is not an issue the Janata Dal takes up. It follows that the Janata Dal equates social justice, with empowerment. Schemes of distributive justice are not as effective according to the Janata Dal, as reservation in government jobs which would provide participation in state power. The question of power is central for the Janata Dal in the context of social justice for the backward castes.

THE LEFT

The announcement of the Mandal Recommendations for reservations for the other Backward Castes and the issues that it has thrown up pose a challenge for all political forces; as much for the Left as for the BJP. In the case of the Left, the formulation of response to these recommendations particularly those relating to reservations on a caste basis represents a peculiar dilemma.

The ideology of both the major Left parties - the CPI and the CPI (M) vouches a thoroughgoing social transformation which would eliminate all 'backwardness, inequality, ignorance poverty and hunger'.¹⁹ This social transformation, would come about only through the operationalisation of the 'principles of Marxism-Leninism which alone shows to the toiling masses the correct way to the ending of the exploitation of man by man, their complete emancipation.'²⁰ It is clear, says Bipan Chandra, that India after 1947 faced the Communists with social phenomena which had no parallel in the previous or contemporary experience of the international communist movement. To deal with them adequately and to overcome or resolve the anomalies produced by the effort to understand them within the Marxist framework, they needed new theories, new paradigms which would incorporate the anomalies as their normal parts.²¹

This need for a reassessment and reformulation of ideological stance is evident especially today. With the announcement of the Mandal recommendation for caste - based reservations, the Left must now decide - will it include castes under the general rubric of the 'oppressed' which has till now been a class - category for the Left or will it dissociate itself from caste - based reservations and other measures because, as it has always maintained, the oppressed must always be seen in terms of their class character ? The issue of caste based reservation is definitely not an issue that the Left is comfortable with. It is forced then, during the Mandal phase, to enter into political activity when the terms of intervention, language, debate and activity, are not set by them, when the idiom and language of debate is fundamentally of a non - class nature.²² The Communist Party resolves this dilemma by trying to understand the institution of caste through tools of analysis which still take class as the basic analytical unit.

The clearest exposition of the Communist Party of India's policy on social justice for the backward castes is to be found in A.B. Bardhan's articles on "Class caste reservation and struggle against casteism".²³ Though both the document and the ideology belong to the CPI, yet the articles state the fundamental content of the communist ideology common to both parties - the CPI as well as the CPI (M). There are differences, however, in the positions that

the parties taken on the Mandal Commission Report. These differences have also been pointed out in the course of the analysis.

"Today the attitude towards castes and the caste system and the problems arising therefrom, marks out a progressive democratic and secular individual or Party from an obscurantist, hide-bound reactionary individual and Party. This has undeniably become a touchstone in India's social and political life". says Bardhan. This statement itself reveals that the concerns of the communist Party include not just the problems of a particular group of backward castes, but also the persistence of the caste system as a whole and that it considers its response to be the progressive, democratic and secular one. The confidence contained in both these propositions marks out the Left parties from most others on the question of social justice for the backward castes. Both the BJP and the Congress as we shall see in the next chapter, speak very little of the problems of backward castes except the Scheduled Castes and tribes and rarely address the caste system as a whole. The Janata Dal too, speaks not of the caste system but only for the Other Backward Castes. Thus, while the other parties - i.e. - the JD, BJP and the Congress speak out for social justice (from the state) for particular caste groups i.e. - the scheduled castes and the Other Backward Castes, it is only the Left which does not just ally itself to the cause

of any particular caste group but instead speaks against the exploitation in the system as a whole.

The Left, offers a critique of the entire system. It holds the caste system largely responsible for causing fragmentation in our society and retarding our pace of development. "Among the divisive forces which afflict our national life, disrupt the bonds of unity among the Indian people, and affect its social advance and further development, casteism or caste conflict is a major factor" it says.

The communist Party does confidently formulate a systemic critique of the caste system. It does not shirk the fundamental questions of how the caste system has come into being and why it has persisted over the years. But this confidence does not belie the assertion made previously in the analysis of the Left's approach to the problem of caste that the caste issue also makes the Left uncomfortable. This is because it is used to seeing oppression as the result of inequitable class relations. This class-based analysis of oppression is disturbed by the necessity now, especially in post-Mandal times, to take account of caste also as a mediating institution between the oppressor and the oppressed. The Communist Party, however, finds a way out of this dilemma. Caste, it says must also be understood only in the background of class inequality and conflict. It serves to conceal the actual contradictions that are unfolding in society.²⁴

Having to come to terms with a reality which also reflects the play of non-class categories such as caste, the Communist Party provides the context in which to interpret the origin, persistence and problems of the caste system. But before taking account of what the party has to say it would be of help of clarify the issues that emerge from this double - edged approach of the Communist ideology towards caste. Is caste an autonomous institution ? Or, to reframe the question, how much autonomy can be granted to the institution of caste ? Is it valid for the Communist Party to emphasize the role of class in propping up the caste identity? How can these questions be answered keeping in mind the specificity of Indian socio-political life. Is it necessarily a betrayal of class - analysis to speak in the idiom of caste or are castes to be seen as the transformation of class in a predominantly rural and social dimense society?²⁵ Must the phenomenon of Other Backward Castes be understood in the framework of class as found in India's indigenous context or that of casteism.

The Left does not look at the caste system as a system by itself. Caste, is, rather, to be seen and understood only against the "background of sharpening class struggles."²⁶ The caste system is being proposed up by the existence of class inequality. "Indian history furnishes proof that the ideology of the caste system has been assiduously propped and upheld by the ruling classes at all times."²⁷ The caste system therefore, is understood by the

Left in a Marxist theoretical framework which does not grant total autonomy to the institution of caste and sees it as one supported by class conflict.

The first mention of the varna vyavastha is generally traced to the Purushsukta hymn of the Rigveda.²⁸ This hymn must not only be seen says Bardhan, as the first to give scriptural arc to the hierarchical order of the caste system. Instead the Left interprets it as the hymn that first notes the early class division of society and invests it with a sacred and divine origin.²⁶ Despite the discrimination and degradation inherent in this institution, it has survived through the centuries, the Left admits. But, it says, this has been so not because it gave the social structure a certain degree of stability and security but because it more or less truthfully reflected the historical reality, legitimized and sanctified by a combination of scriptural injunctions, mythology and rituals which even the social reformers found difficult to challenge.³⁰

The scriptural injunctions provided thus not the basis but only the popular legitimacy to the hierarchy embodied by the caste system. Communist ideology also explains the continuity of the caste system upto the present day through the continued existence of class conflict and the role of colonialism, vested interests born of capitalist development and electoral politics "to conceal the actual contradictions that are unfolding in society".³¹ It sees the prolonged colonial domination and intervention in our socio-

economic life as having thwarted and distorted our normal development, slowing down and inhibiting the class divisions and antagonisms that are related with the development in the means of production, and along with it the partial breakdown of the caste system. Opportunistic bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties and groups rely on the manipulation of these caste identities to consolidate vote banks.³²

The party is very critical of those who attribute an independent existence to the institution of caste and even find something to appreciate in it. "There are those", it says, "who uphold the caste system as an eternal and specially Indian phenomenon, relevant even in the present situation, may be after purging it of some perversities, and restoring it to its' so-called 'pristine purity'".³³ The Party dubs such an approach 'unhistorical' and 'metaphysical' and as one which attempts to gloss over the discriminations, the inequality and the inhumanity that is implicit in the system. Here the Party is referring to the BJP. and the other RSS front organisations like the BMS, ABVP and VHP.³⁴

What does the Party have to say on what must be done to do away with this unjust and exploitative system? The ideology of Marxism', it says, helps one to understand not only how the system takes birth but also how it shall end. This ideology helps one to understand that what occasionally bursts out on the surface as a resurgence of casteism, bitter caste conflicts or as inhuman atrocities perpetrated

by the upper castes against the lower castes, are but the death-throes of a moribund system, destined to disappear. But this, it warns, will not happen spontaneously, or with ease. It will happen because of the "tenacious, continuous and militant struggle" waged by the revolutionary toiling masses against the present unjust social order and against all the social forces which wish to exploit every divisive element, including the caste system for prolonging their vested interests.

Not only does Left ideology explain the origin as well as the continuity of caste exploitation with reference to an underlying base of class conflict, it also predicts its end with reference to a dying out of class conflict. There is evidence in the Left's critique of the caste system of the vantage point of an outsider. It studies caste system in terms of its origin persistence and death by first locating itself outside it i.e., in a class - oriented paradigm of social analysis.

But the Left does not always see the institution of caste as only piggy back riding on class. There has been, in the Left, in both the CPI and the CPI (M), the awareness that 'caste-specificity should not be under estimated.³⁵ Some sociologists, says Bardhan, have tended to "ignore the specific social and ideological struggle against caste and the caste system and its fall-out" while concentrating on the economic and political struggle. That, he says, is a mistake. Even assuming that it (caste) is a

'superstructure', says Bardhan, it does not follow that it will disappear when the 'base' has been demolished. Therefore, he admits, the need is to conduct also a prolonged ideological political struggle against Chaturvarna, Manu-Smriti and other scriptural authorities which sanctify the caste system. It is only such a prolonged and tenacious struggle, he says, coupled with structural changes and revolutionary social transformation which socialism alone can herald that the groundwork will be laid for the elimination of casteism and the caste system in course of time.

This is thus a rough statement of the fundamental principles of Marxist ideology on caste. With this ideological framework, the Left takes up then, the issue of reservation. The fundamental question that can be posed within the parameters of Marxist politics are questions of radical land reforms, industrialization, creation of more job opportunities, and the spread of mass education to show the alternate path to the path of capitalist development. But the Mandal issue forces the Communists to take up another question - the question of caste-based reservations which had never been a major part of Communist agenda for reform.

The CPI(M) particularly, which has all along been against reservation on a caste basis, and particularly against reservation for the Other Backward Castes, now finds itself supporting the V.P. Singh governments decision to

implement the reservation for the Other Backward castes. So how does it justify this support? The CPI(M) has consistently maintained that there should be an 'economic criterion' for reservation. The People's Democracy editorial of August 19 asks the question - "In the sphere of reservation of jobs, why should not an economic criterion be adopted ? A week later the politburo modifies this general stand for an economic criterion. to one of an economic criterion for Backward Classes. It 'maintains that within the reservation allotted to them (BCs) there should be an economic criterion'.³⁶

The meaning of an 'economic criterion' is quite well-known. There is no ambiguity that what is being asked for is some sort of cut-off point, an income level, or class beyond which reservation should not be available. A week later, the CPI(M) makes the claim that the pattern of reservations for the backward castes introduction in Bihar in 1978 by the Karpoori Thakur government provides for the economic criterion within the reservation for certain backward classes by having two list's.³⁷ The two lists in Bihar do divide the backward castes, but they do not provide for any differentiation within a caste. This is very different from the economic criterion that the CPI(M) had earlier demanded. In fact, in West Bengal, there is no list of Backward classes (OBCs) because the CPI(M) has opposed caste as a basis for reservation. Therefore, for the CPI(M) to now ally itself to the position the Karpoori Thakur

Report in Bihar show a definite change of stand. Both the Communist parties however, support reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, as a means of granting them an entry in administration and educational institutions. In their case, argues Bardhan, the constitutional provisions have to be fully implemented, and all the means by which an upper caste dominated administration has continued to deny them their share, have to be roundly condemned.

The Communist parties share with the Janata Dal the imperative to build up an administration in which every caste and community may be adequately represented so that it may enjoy the confidence of all instead of being weighted in favour of certain castes. This holds true at least in the case of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, for whom the Communist parties have no hesitation in prescribing reservation in government jobs as the cure for such a skewed administrative structure. When it comes to the issue of extending reservation in the government jobs to the Other Backward Castes, however, the Communist parties express some reservations.

We have already seen the dilemma that the Communist Party (Marxist) faces in this context. The CPI also faces such a dilemma. It resolves it in its Central Executive Committee in August, 1990 where it was stated that "we may not impose any such (economic) ceiling from the moment of implementation, but may consider it after a period of say

ten years, when the results are reviewed"³⁸. The CPI earlier had been of the view that there should definitely be an income ceiling in the case of the OBCs above which OBC people should not be given the facility of reservation because "unlike in the case of the SCs and STs, a small stream of affluent bourgeoisie has been coming up among the OBCs both in the towers and the countryside".

The CPI (M), therefore, considers the economic criterion crucial to the definition of backwardness. So it was for the CPI too until it decided to support the Mandal proposals for reservation 'for the time being' even without the economic criterion.

Although the Leftists expressed their formal acceptance of the Mandal report quite early in the day, their later decision roughly two months after the announcement to oppose any move that might delay implementation underlines a "change in attitude."³⁹ The various ifs and buts that they had earlier voiced while acknowledging acceptance of the Mandal Commission report in principle become rather muted. Thus, though, in their initial response to the report, both parties talk of the need for an economic criterion, and point out other problems such as the manner of announcement of the report being 'bald and cryptic',⁴⁰ the need for consensus on reservation policy, or the need to keep out reservations at the promotional stages, or the inadequacy of reservations alone as a measure of social reform, very soon both parties reveal

a more unequivocal stand on the Mandal recommendations for reservation.

This sudden insistence that the Mandal Commission Report be implemented straight away could be because of many reasons. The Leftists perhaps, wished to distance themselves from the BJP and other vociferous anti-reservations groups within the Congress (I) as also the Janata Dal dissidents who favored a more gradual approach. Or, the Leftists suddenly unequivocal stand probably resulted from electoral compulsions. The prime minister's 'natural allies' could have made up their minds about backing V.P. Singh in the next election.⁴¹ The larger question that emerges from this sudden shift of stance is - for a Party of the Left which practices a politics backed by a firm ideological framework, to what extent do immediate political compulsions influence its perception and response to issues? Are these frequent changes and shift indicative of a flexibility of ideology, desirable or otherwise?

What, then, do the two Left parties have to say - firstly on the caste system, and secondly on the method of its reform? The Communist parties unlike the others, i.e. the Janata Dal, Congress (I) and the BJP, confidently articulate a critique of the caste system rather than merely allying themselves to the cause of either the SC/STs or the OBCs. Communist ideology insists that caste hierarchy be seen as drawing its life force from underlying class conflict. However, though the Party goes into the origin and

continuity of the caste system, it is an outsider's critique. The Communist Party firmly believes that while in the long run historical process would logically culminate in the death of class conflict and with it the divisions based on caste, in the immediate political context, the state must take on the responsibility of caste reform. Both the CPI and the CPI(M) strongly support the policy of reservation for the Scheduled Castes along with measures of distributive justice. Along with the Janata Dal one hears the Left parties talk of the need for alleviating caste backwardness through participation in political power. This may be done by opening up the bureaucracy for the entry of these castes. But while the Left parties have no hesitation in granting reservation to the Scheduled Castes, in the case of the Other Backward Castes their position becomes ambivalent. Both parties call for the incorporation of the economic criteria in provision of reservation for the OBCs. Later the CPI, however drops this reluctance and commits total support for the proposals of the Mandal Commission in this regard. Unlike the other parties, however, the Left does not rely only on state action for dealing with the problem of caste exploitation. It talks also, and at length, of the need for initiating a mass struggle against the present unjust social order. It talks of programme of 'social and ideological transformation'.

A comparison of the positions of the Janata Dal and the Left parties on the issue of caste and social justice

for the backward castes tells us the following : Firstly the Left formulates a systemic critique of the caste system while the Janata Dal nearly allies itself to the cause of the Other Backward castes. The critique of the system that the Left makes, however, is largely one that attempts to look behind the system, at the economic forces sustaining the system. It does not seriously take into account the internal dynamics of the working of the caste system in the local context. Secondly, the Janata Dal conceives of social justice as a programme to be implemented by the state. The Left parties on the other hand, emphasise also on the need for a larger mass mobilization to bring about social change or reform. Thirdly, the Janata Dal clearly makes a choice for empowerment as against measures of distributive justice. The Left confronts the issue of empowerment (through reservation) of the Other Backward Castes with a greater reluctance. Though initially both the CPI and the CPI(M) insist upon reservations only on the basis of economic criteria, it is only through later modifications in their stands, especially that of the CPI that they accept the Mandal proposals. This reluctance to grant reservations in government jobs is not evident in their proposals for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

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CHAPTER IV

PARTY POSITIONS - II

CONGRESS I AND THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

The advent of the Mandal Commission Report in National politics through the announcement by the V.P.Singh government of the partial implementation of its proposals has brought about changes in the equations of power and domination. What is happening now due to the changing equations, is the setting free of blocks of voters previously attached in terms of allegiances to certain political parties.¹ Varying recombinations are taking place guided by either perceptions of the "possibilities of empowerment" or concern with questions of "identity".

The Bharatiya Janata Party, converts the question of identity into the slogan of 'Hindutva' and seeks to enlarge its support base on this basis. But the issue of empowerment for the Other Backward Castes raised by the Janata Dal places the party in an uncomfortable position. The BJP realizes that if it endorses the National Front's decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report, it could lose the sympathy of the upper castes which have been its traditional support base. If it opposes it, on the other + hand, it would alienate the numerically large OBCs. The Congress (I) is also faced with a similar dilemma. The Congress (I) has also drawn support largely from the upper caste Hindus over the years. Both the BJP and the Congress

(I) thus find themselves faced with an issue with which they are ideologically and pragmatically uncomfortable. The Janata Dal is responsible for introducing the issue of reservation for the OBCs in contemporary politics with the revival of the Mandal Commission Report. The Left is its 'natural ally'. It is the BJP and the Congress (I) who are muted and cautious in their response to the issue. This chapter shall study the response of the Congress (I) and the BJP on the issue of caste and the social justice for the backward castes.

CONGRESS (I)

Whereas the Janata Dal clearly declares itself to be the harbinger of social change Congress (I) makes it clear in the very preamble of its manifesto that - "Five successive Congress (I) governments served out their full term" because they assured to the country "stability, progress and radical reform without social disruption." Stability is, thus, the keyword and 'radical reform' would be welcome only if it came unaccompanied by 'social disruption.'

What is important therefore, is not just the issue at hand, but also the larger self image that the party wants to project. To understand why what is said on the caste question is said, it becomes necessary to assess it in the context of the party's self-definition. It would help, therefore, to take a look at the main constituent elements

of this image. The Congress (I) is very self conscious about, first of all, it's stature as the country's premier political party.⁵ Being so self-consciously premier in status would operationally mean that the Congress (I) would be very careful about seconding any measures/policies that might disturb a constituency that has voted it to power time and again. Secondly, the Congress (I) constantly invokes the catchword - 'stability' 'Disruption, divisiveness and discord' must be avoided at all costs and the most important lesson to be taken from the fall of the Janata Dal government is that "the Congress (I) alone is capable of providing stable government at the centre."⁶

Unlike the Janata Dal which is in search of a new constituency, the Congress (I) has already a time-tested constituency to maintain. So stability would understandably be more desirable to the Congress (I) than change. It defines at length it's conception of stability. "Stability does not mean stagnation. Stability does not mean the service of the vested interests". Stability the congress would have us believe - almost means change: "Stability brings change. Stability brings growth and development. Stability brings justice for the poor and opportunity for the deprived. Stability brings peaceful non-violent transformation. Stability brings the respect of the world."⁷ A third component of the Congress (I)'s self-image is it's emphasis on continuity. The Congress (I) has been in power for the major part of the almost forty-six years after

independence and was part of the national movement for freedom before that. It is self-conscious about this continuity. "For forty of our forty four years as an independent nation. India has had Congress (I) government..... For forty of the last forty four years, the congress has patiently built the country"⁸

Perhaps because the Congress (I) hardly has much to say on caste and because it is so guarded and economical in whatever it does say, that it becomes necessary to understand it's stance on the caste problem through any clues that one might be able to extricate from it's statements on other issues. We may look for such clues in the party's frequent attempt, for example, to build up the scenario of a nation in peril, of threats to the integrity or unity of the country brought on by the politics of confrontation. For example - "The nation is in peril. It's unity is in danger. It's integrity is threatened. Social harmony has been shattered. Indians are being turned against Indians."⁹ It says after the violence and agitation against the Mandal Commission Report.

Similarly, in an obvious reference to the Mandal Commission Report issue, the Congress (I) says -- "Whenever non-Congress (I) governments have come to power, they have brought nothing but raging instability, bitter infighting for transitory benefits of power, violence between Indian and Indian in the name of caste and community, and misgovernment which has hurt progress and damaged India's

position in the world" The Congress (I), on the otherhand., has --- "over and over again proved that it is the only party which can provide a stable government to the nation."¹⁰

Implicit in this statement is the assumption that issues like Mandal shall only create disunity and divisions. The Congress (I) perceives the Mandal issue not as one which poses the challenge of a reformulation of or rethinking on the concept of social justice. It sees it, instead, as an issue which would threaten the stability and integrity of the country. Clues to its perception of the problem of the OBCs can be found in the Congress (I)'s avowal of secularism: "People of all communities, faiths and persuasions have equal rights in our polity. We oppose communal and caste issues being brought into the political process for electoral gains. Such issues just do not belong to this process."¹¹ One could attribute to the Congress (I) here - a breakthrough in the search for an alternative to the state-centric idiom which informs the raising and resolving of all issues had the Congress (I) also something to say on just where these issues do belong. In the absence of such an alternative - all that the Congress (I) seems to be expressing is its discomfort in coming face to face with an issue in the Indian political process which it can neither patronise for fear of disturbing its vote-banks, nor ignore because of its potential to fetch votes. The fact that the Congress (I) is wary of caste as a

variable in the political process is also revealed by other statements such as the one by Congress (I) leader Anand Sharma where he expresses concern that the caste factor had replaced class after the acceptance of the Mandal Report¹².

Finally, we come to the question -- what does the Congress (I) really say on caste? For the most part, the Congress (I) does not say anything at all. In one of its published documents, the congress lists out its 'achievements' during its years in power from '84 to '89.¹³ No where does it mention any programme/policy for the OBC. Caste only finds a brief mention -- in the form of certain measures for the SC/ST. We find no mention of the OBC in its policies and programmes till 1989. 'Social Justice' was clearly not a major concern for the Congress (I). It is only after the raising of the Mandal issue by the Janata Dal government in August 1990, that the OBC problem finds a mention in Congress (I) documents.

Then too the Congress (I) is basically responding to the agenda set by the Janata Dal. There is reluctance and hesitation in the Congress (I)'s statements on the OBC question which contrasts vividly with the Janata Dal's enthusiasm for the issue. Caste finds only a cursory mention in the Congress (I) agenda from '84 to '89 and that too only in the form of reservation for SC/ST. How does the Congress (I) define its agenda after the blowing up of the Mandal issue? It pledges measures like - the extension of reservation for SC/ST in Parliament and Assemblies by

another ten years, investing the SC/ST commission with statutory powers and setting up of Dr. Ambedkar University in Lucknow. Other measures are outlined such as the setting up of commissions, reservation in legislatures, loans, help to SC/ST farmers and students, housing loans etc. Both reservation and schemes of distributive justice are recommended by the Congress (I) for the SC's & ST's.

Finally, the Congress (I) mentions the OBCs. -- "Socially and educationally backward minorities will be included in the beneficiaries entitled to reservations and other special measures intended for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Muslims engaged in occupations such as scavenging..."¹⁴ There are several things which are important in this statement. Firstly, backward castes are seen only as 'beneficiaries' of the state. The backwardness of the Other Backward Castes does not exist as an issue except vis a vis the benefits it can elicit from the state. The Congress (I) shares with the Janata Dal a blindness to the cultural -- ideological content of the problem of the backward castes. Secondly, it mentions - 'reservations and other special measures'. The Janata Dal has succeeded in pushing the issue of participation in power through reservations ahead of other measures of distributive justice. The Congress (I) in responding to the issue, follows the Janata Dal's order of precedence. Finally, this statement on the measures for the OBCs figures in between other measures for religious and linguistic minorities. The

OBC cause is not really the Congress (I) cause. It must mention it because the Janata Dal has made it impossible not to, but it does so with reluctance and relinquishes hold of it just as soon as it can, proceeding then to talk of other issues. The very next paragraph for example talks of the safer, more general 'minorities' -- "maximum assistance will be provided for promoting and accelerating the pace of education among the minorities--".

It comes back to the OBC issue but in the most general terms under the heading :

"16. Social and Economic Justice

The Congress (I) has always been at the forefront of the struggle for social justice and in the fight against social and economic inequality. It has been an integral part of the struggle for the emancipation of socially and educationally backward classes from the very inception of that struggle. The Congress (I) reaffirms its unshakable commitment to this struggle."¹⁵

Then, finally, it takes up the issue of 'Reservations'. The Congress (I) is forced to tackle the issue because it has been forced to the centre of the debate by the August 7, government order. Here, though the Congress (I) declares its continued commitment to reservations as an instrument of social justice and that it is also committed to undertaking special measures in favour of the Socially

and Educationally Backward Classes, including reservations in jobs, it also qualifies this commitment by saying that -- in implementing these special measures, "preference will be given to the poorer sections among the backward classes while ensuring that if candidates are not available from the poorer sections the benefit will go to other members within the backward classes."¹⁶

One may trace the Congress (I)'s stand on reservations better through the various statements that appeared in the newspaper reports of the time. They reveal that initially the Congress (I) was not clear on where it stood. It came out with a peculiar statement on the Mandal Commission Report where it said that it did not oppose reservation per se but it did not support them per se either.¹⁷ Then it decided that it was against reservations based on caste because it only serves to strengthen caste-consciousness and casteism. Senior Congress (I) leaders like Mr. Vasant Sathe and Mr. Gadgil spoke against reservations based on caste. Mr. Sathe argued that if reservation on caste basis would remove the social stigma that backward classes suffer, he would have propagated it. But, these would only enforce caste barriers".¹⁸ It is Mr. Sathe again who says elsewhere that "giving recognition and providing employment and status purely on the basis of backwardness of the caste may provide economic advantage but will, instead of removing, perpetuate the curse of casteist stigma as the person concerned would be carrying this OBC plate around his

neck throughout his life...."¹⁹ Empowerment of the Other Backward Castes, thus, does not seem to be an urgent cause to the Congress (I) I, while the Janata Dal makes it its mission.

But, if the Congress (I) does not believe that reservation of government jobs shall help in the removal of backwardness of the Other Backward Castes, what remedy does it prescribe? ' What comprises its programme of social justice? "The only way to remove this social stigma would be a social revolution" it says, which "changes the whole religious order, the kind Guru Nanak had started"²⁰ Mr. Sathe, again, stresses the need to abolish the existing caste system. This system, he says, was the base of many ills afflicting the society. Reservation was not the solution to the problem of the backward strata of society, he concludes. Thus, as an alternative to reservations , the Congress (I) merely suggests social revolution but does not make the effort to concretise what exactly it means by social revolution, how it is to be brought about and what would the party's contribution be in this regard. In the above of such a social revolution, however, the Congress (I) takes the position that it would support reservations if an economic criterion were to be incorporated. In this context, the Congress (I) also supported the proposal for a 5% quota for the poor among the forward classes worked out by the BJP and the Left in August, 1990.

Finally, the Congress (I) presented its own alternative reservation package. The Congress (I) working committee came out with the "Rajiv Gandhi formula".²¹ This formula excludes a few categories of people of the socially and educationally backward castes from receiving the benefits of reservation as outlined by the Mandal Commission Report. These include individuals of backward castes who have been fee paying students at public schools or either of whose parents are or have been employed in the higher grades of government service; individuals, either of whose parents are or have been employed in the higher grades of government services; individuals, either of whose parents is a qualified professional or has been a member of the council of ministers at the centre or state or a judge and individuals whose parents have been or are taxpayers and whose parents own more than a specified area of land or property.

To summarise, the Congress (I) identifies itself too closely with 'stability' and continuity' to offer a fundamental or a basic critique of the caste system. It does not take up the issue of caste inequality and social justice for the backward castes at length except for the denunciation of atrocities on the Scheduled Castes and tribes before the announcement of the implementation of the Mandal Commission proposals for reservation. The Congress (I) treats the issue of empowerment with extreme wariness. It does not consider that empowerment of the OBCs through

reservation of government jobs would remove their backwardness. On the other hand, it says, it would only strengthen casteism. The Congress (I) suggests reservation for the Other Backward Castes after the incorporation of the economic criterion. It does not outline in any detail a programme of social justice outside the sphere of state action, except stating in the most general terms the need for social revolution. The Congress (I) makes a sharp differentiation between social justice for the Scheduled Castes and for the Other Backward Castes. While it recommends measures of distributive justice as well as reservation for the Scheduled Castes, it is reluctant to recommend reservations for the Other Backward Castes unless an economic criterion is added on.

BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY

The Bharatiya Janata Party has made large electoral gains in the last two elections. In the 1989 General Elections, it raised its strength dramatically from two to eighty eight. This was the result of its campaign to carve out one single, massive Hindu vote bank across the country through the Ram-Janambhoomi issue. It has tried to mobilise various castes through its slogan of 'Hindutva'. It used this controversy as a religious symbol to create unity among the divergent Hindu castes and has succeeded to an extent. Hinduism was sought to be 'Semitised' but this was a most difficult exercise because the caste hierarchy, apart from the diverse and open nature of its theology was the most powerful obstacle on the way to unity.²² The BJP used Ram as a symbol to rally around all the castes under its banner. It used all the devices for the political use of Ram : it drew up a plan to construct a Ram Mandir where the Babri mosque stands today; it gave a call for donation of bricks from the dive lakhs villages of India, it drew up plans to take out these donated bricks in the form of processions from villages, twons and cities. It also planned, with the help of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, to mobilise lakhs of Kar Sevaks on an auspicious day fixed by Dharam Sammelan in Haridwar. All possible means were employed by the BJP to consolidate Hindu constituency. With the announcement of its decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report, the constituency of the BJP has been seriously threatened. The

implementation of the Report could be a major obstacle for 'Hindu Unity'. It would make it difficult to both unite the backward caste with the upper caste Hindus and to semitise Hinduism. The demand for social equity would attack the Hindu monolith that the BJP intended to construct.

The BJP has, therefore, been the most vocal critic of the Mandal Report. How has it formulated its position on the Report and on the issues of caste and social justice for the backward castes? Before coming to the specific position that the party formulates on the problem of backward castes, it would help to take a look at what the party defines to be its main commitments, its ideology. It is only in this background that we would be able to analyse the stand that the party takes on the problem of backward castes. The party manifest issued at the time of the 1991 Lok Sabha mid-term polls - begins with a preface titled - "We believe that"²³ Here the BJP outlines its basic ideological commitments.

- i) Firstly it aims to provide an "alternative to the Congress Culture". The BJP makes it clear that it alone can provide a 'clean', 'independent' and 'complete alternative to the Congress'. It claims that it can revitalise Indian politics which is now steeped in inertia. In its response to any issue, therefore, the BJP is acutely conscious of the fact that it has reached a position where it can project itself as a viable national alternative. Its response

to the Mandal Commission Report also would be determined by the extent to which its support or opposition would be able to strengthen or weaken its claim for power.

- ii) It pledges to espouse "Swadesh" and "Swadharna". The BJP reiterates its belief in Swadeshi Nationalism. The BJP must juxtapose its concept of nationalism with that of religion. Hindutva by itself may be highly potent and a political issue but it can also be extremely fragile.²⁴ What, however lends it immediate and long term significance is its equation with nationalism of a particular pedigree.
- iii) It promises to bring about social change without conflict. The party, it says, is committed to the upliftment of the poor and down trodden without inciting war.
- iv) It commits itself to the construction of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya. The reconstruction of the Ramjanambhoomi temple at Ayodhya says the BJP, is an attempt to set right the mistakes of the past in a symbolic manner.
- v) Lastly, it states its intention to create a modern India which is strongly rooted in its ancient cultural tradition. The BJP pledges to modernise the nation on the basis of science and technology only

while simultaneously "strengthening the cultural roots of our national life".

The picture that emerges is that of a party staking its claim to power on the basis of its identification with a 'glorious' indigenous Hindu cultural tradition. Through the issue of the reconstruction of the Ayodhya temple the BJP hopes to do just that.

What does the BJP have to say on caste? The BJP, first of all, is defensive on the question of caste. "Some persons are deliberately spreading mis-conception about the BJP. There are members who had been members of Bhartiya Jana Sangh and prior to that of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. They know that in the RSS, there is no place for caste discrimination....."²⁵ This defensiveness of the BJP contrasts sharply with the confidence with which the Left parties as well as the Janata Dal take up the question of caste and caste reform. Secondly, the BJP seems inclined to leave the responsibility of the removal of casteism and caste oppression to the state. "...The elected MPs, legislators etc. of scheduled castes have special responsibility for the upliftment of this class. This class of society is badly affected due to social injustice, illiteracy and unemployment."²⁶ The BJP, expresses surprise that even with the advent of independent statehood, caste consciousness has not died a natural death but unfortunately has grown. This it concludes, must be due to persistent wrong and defective policies adopted by successive

governments who have taken half-hearted steps for the social and economic uplift of scheduled castes.²⁷

Inherent in this statement is the implication that if only the government had adopted a more suitable policy, casteism would have been eradicated. This assumption is also implicit in the BJP's surprise that "In spite of the enactment of the Protection of Civil Rights Act, untouchability is still plaguing our society."²⁸ This, it concludes, must be happening because- the number of cases registered under this Act is very low and those of acquitted from amongst them is very high or because the annual reports on the Protection of Civil Rights Act are no longer being laid on the table of the Parliament and State Assemblies as required under the Act. Again the unspoken sequel to this statement is that if only so many criminals had not been acquitted and if only the reports had been laid on the Parliament table, untouchability would not be plaguing our society today.

These statements show the BJP's perception of the problem of backward castes. It regards the problem as one which can be eradicated by the passing of laws by the State dictating its abolition. The statements betray a narrow conception of both - the problem of caste backwardness as well as of state action. Untouchability, for example, is a complex problem involving socio-economic and cultural exploitation. The passage of laws prohibiting untouchability is not the only solution to the problem. What is required is

a more comprehensive programme of action, both by the state (for example, in terms of economic help) and also outside the sphere of state intervention, for example, through mass mobilisation.

The Scheduled Caste Morcha, a wing of the BJP, makes the following demands:²⁹ i) "The government should identify the atrocity-prone districts in the country and post collectors, SPs and other district officials committed to the cause of the Scheduled Castes; ii) Annual report on the protection of Civil Rights Act should be regularly discussed in Parliament and state assemblies so that, the Act is kept under constant review. Similar provision should be made for the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989; iii) Special and mobile courts should be set up in sufficient number to take cognizance of untouchability and atrocity cases; iv) State level committees for proper implementation of PRC Act are dormant. They seldom meet. they should be renewed and made active. This earnest emphasis on the Prevention of Civil Rights Act, state level committees and special mobile courts reflects the BJPs faith in state action vis-a-vis the problem of castes backwardness, particularly the scheduled castes and tribes. The BJP also demands that there should be a separate ministry to look after the all round interests of SC and ST both at the centre and states and that the caste system should be abolished by law.³⁰

Does the BJP really believe that the caste system can be abolished by law ? Does it show any awareness of an alternative course of action to influence people, to reach out to them apart from the agencies of the state ?

The answer to this question would be that it does. On the issue of the construction of the Ram Janambhoomi temple, for example, the BJP has consistently held that the answer could not be found in the courts' verdict alone. It has led campaigns for mass mobilisation on the issue - i.e. mammoth rallies and the Rath yatra undertaken by Mr. L.K. Advani. However, on the issue Mandal, it is content to turn over all responsibility to the Supreme Court's verdict. "BJP leader A.B. Bajpayee today urged the centre to put off the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report till, the Supreme Court gave its verdict on the petition challenging the government notification."³¹.

On the question of caste backwardness, the BJP exhibits a faith in state action which it denies when it comes to the temple issue. This emphasis on State action, as illustrated above, also reflects the BJP's perception of the nature of the caste problem. Caste inequality, for the BJP comes to mean only that which the state can control through laws. Thus, while it talks of "atrocities" against scheduled castes such as "rape, arson, murder and grievous hurt"³² other subtler forms of caste oppression such as the discrimination faced in everyday social relations never becomes an issue for the BJP. This, in fact, is reflected

in the positions of all the political parties - not just the BJP.

The BJP's position on the question of caste reform can however, be further broken down into two - i.e. the party's position on the problem of the SC/ST and the party's position on the problem of the Other Backward Castes. For the alleviation of the backwardness of Scheduled Castes and tribes, the BJP pledges both - measures of distributive justice as well as access to power, but hesitates to do so for the Other Backward Castes.

On the issue of the Other Backward Castes, the BJP is usually very reticent. In most party documents there are detailed measures suggested for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and just a paragraph on the Other Backward Castes. In what it recommends for the OBCs we find the party hesitant on the question of providing reservation of jobs for them. While for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, it shows no reluctance in calling for the proper implementation of reservation in government jobs.³³ The BJP never says that the OBCs should not get reservation at all if the economic criterion is not added on. Yet it is clearly uncomfortable with providing the Other Backward Castes with reservation in government jobs statement such as these illustrate the BJP's discomfort: Mr. Ram Naik of the BJP says that his party was broadly in favour of the Mandal Report for job reservations to OBCs with preference to economically weaker sections among them. The BJP was also committed to reservation for

other communities on the basis economic backwardness.³⁴ The reasons for the BJP's reluctance in granting reservation of jobs to the OBCs are evident. While reservation for the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes is acceptable because it is a legacy of the pre-independence period, the reservation for the other backward castes would lead to the empowerment of the sizable number of other backward castes which would disturb the Hindu monolith that the BJP is trying to construct as its support base. It would create divisions within the Hindu community. It works out then along with the Left, a 5% quota for the poor among the forward classes. This discomfort of the BJP with the proposal of reservation of govt. jobs for the OBCs is also evident from other statements in which it complains about the "manner in which the acceptance of the recommendations was announced."³⁵ It also claims that the implementation of the Mandal recommendations would be "counter productive" in terms of creating social conflicts that would retard the expected results."³⁶ And finally it says that "economic backwardness should be the basis of reservations in jobs. The party believed in only two castes - the haves and have nots".³⁷ The BJP also pledges faith in the Karpoori Thakur formula for reservations for OBCs - which takes into account the differentiation amongst the OBCs on the economic criterion.

Thus, the BJP does not consider caste groups except the scheduled castes as legitimate claimants reservation in

government services only on the basis of their caste identity. In fact even when discussing measures of distributive justice, it takes care to specify that' it speaks for the economically backward of Other Backward Castes.

Lastly, the BJP tends to view the problem of social justice for the oppressed castes as a Hindu problem "The problem of social backwardness" it says, is an internal problem of Hindu Society and hence the special provisions being made to eliminate it should not be extended to non-Hindus.³⁸ This is a logical consequence, in fact, of the ideology of Hindutva that the BJP propagates. All issues must necessarily be seen as 'Hindu' or 'non-Hindu'. The BJP would find it difficult to respond to a problem outside this paradigm.

How does the Bharatiya Janata Party, then, frame a critique of the caste system and what does it suggest should be done to bring about reform? By whom should this be done?

The BJP answers these questions in the following way. Firstly by constantly pledging allegiance to Hindu tradition, the BJP makes it clear that it does not wish to make a very fundamental critique to the caste system as it is an organic part of that tradition. It also reiterates its reluctance to question too deep when it talks of bringing about social change and reform without inciting social conflict. The BJP thus does not question the system as such.

On the other hand, it allies itself with the cause of the backward castes especially the Scheduled Castes. For the Scheduled Castes, it recommends measure of distributive justice as well as provision of reservation in government jobs. For the other backward castes, however it recommends reservations only after incorporation of the economic criteria. The BJP further views social justice only through state action. It leaves virtually unexplored (except the cursory mention) the alternative of reform through an ideological-political struggle including mass mobilisation. It offers therefore, but a piecemeal critique of the caste system, defines social justice only through state action and makes a clear distinction between the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Castes offering empowerment to the former and denying it to the latter.

On comparing the position of the Congress (I) and the BJP the following points emerge :-

Both the Congress (I) and the BJP do not make a structural critique of the caste system. Both shirk the fundamental questions i.e. concerning the cultural, social, economical and political forces that keep the caste system alive till today. Both parties conceive of caste reform only in terms of state action alluding to reform outside the state arena only in vague terms. Both the Congress (I) and BJP show reluctance in supporting the reservation of government jobs for the other backward castes though this does not hold in the case of the Scheduled Castes and

Tribes. The only real point of divergence between the positions of the Congress (I) and the BJP on caste and social justice is the larger paradigm within which each locate itself. For the BJP this paradigm is 'Hindutva' and for the Congress (I) it is its constantly expressed concern, for the stability and integrity of the country.

N O T E S

1. Javeed Alam, "Making of the Election", in Communalisation of Politics and 10th Lok Sabha Elections", (Delhi, Ajanta, 1993), p. 49.
2. Ibid, p. 49.
3. In this context, Myron Veiner suggests also that the base including the caste base of the Congress, Jana Sangh and the RSS is similar. In Party Politics in India, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957), pages 235-238.
4. Election manifesto, General Election 1991, Congress (I), p.1.
5. Ibid, p.1.
6. Ibid, p.3.
7. Ibid, p.4.
8. Ibid, p.4.
9. Ibid, p.8.
10. From Text of Resolutions adopted at the 79th Plenary Session of Indian National Congress, 1992, p.32.
11. Quoted from the 'Presidential Address' by Shri P. V. Narasimha Rao, in Indian National Congress : 79th Plenary Session, p.8.
12. Hindustan Times, September 11, 1990.
13. Election Manifesto, 1991 of Indian National Congress, p.26.
14. Ibid, p.30.
15. Ibid, p.32.
16. Ibid, p.33.
17. Economic Times, September 10, 1990.
18. Times of India, September 12, 1990.
19. Hindustan Times, September 25, 1990.
20. Hindustan Times, September 11, 1990.
21. Indian Express, August 31, 1990.

22. Asghar Ali Engineer "Lok Sabha Elections, 1991 and Communalisation of Politics", in Communalisation of Politics and 110th Lok Sabha Elections, (Delhi, Ajanta, 1993), p.15.
23. BJP Manifesto for Lok Sabha mid-term polls, 1991, p.1.
24. Javeed Alam, "Making sense of the Election", in Communalisation of Politics and 10th Lok Sabha Elections, Asghar Ali Engineer (ed.), (Delhi, Ajanta, 1993), p.54.
25. Quoted from 'Bharatiya Janata Party : Scheduled Caste Forum', A BJP publication, 1990, p.16.
26. Ibid, p.16.
27. Ibid, p.21.
28. Ibid, p.21.
29. Ibid, p.22.
30. Ibid, p.25.
31. Times of India, 26 September, 1990.
32. 'Bharatiya Janata Party; Scheduled Caste Forum', A BJP publication, 1990, p.22.
33. Ibid, p.17.
34. Times of India, September 4, 1990.
35. Indian Express, August 30, 1990.
36. Ibid.
37. Tribune, September 9, 1990.
38. Indian Express August 30, 1990.

CONCLUSION

The debate on caste and social justice for the backward castes has a long history. With the announcement by the National Front government of the decision to reserve 27% of government jobs for the Other Backward Castes, this debate has received a new lease of life. This thesis made an attempt to investigate the nature of this debate through an analysis of the positions that the political parties take in it. This has been done through a study of the manifestoes, resolutions, and party statements.

The debate reveals certain distinctive characteristics. None of the parties, except the Left parties, makes a systemic critique of the institution of caste. The Janata Dal takes up the cause of the Other Backward Castes while the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress (I) speak against the exploitation of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. It is only the Left parties who address themselves to fundamental questions such as - how did the hierarchy inherent in the system come into existence? What are the factors that sustain and perpetuate this inequality?

Secondly, the concept of social justice is almost completely identified with State action today. While earlier attempts at caste reform such as these by Phule and Gandhi used the manipulation of cultural symbols and popular beliefs to attack caste inequality, today it is a problem which is sought to be resolved through State intervention.

While the Congress (I) and the Bharatiya Janata Party do allude to 'other methods' and the need for a 'social revolution' concrete proposals for such a programme to remove caste backwardness are not explicated. It is only the Left parties, again, who articulate at length their concern for a wider socio-ideological mobilization alongwith structural changes in political and economic terms.

Thirdly, of the two forms of State intervention, i.e. - distributive justice and empowerment, it is empowerment through the reservation of government jobs which receives primacy in the contemporary debate. While the Janata Dal and the Left parties support it, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress (I) cannot ignore it and must give reasons for opposing it. All political parties, whether they support or oppose reservations for the Other Backward Castes must perforce address the issue. They must take a stand and justify it too. Lastly, the debate shows that while consensus has been achieved on the measures for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, social justice for the Other Backward Castes remains a contentious issue.

The distinguishing feature of the Post-Mandal debate on caste and social justice as reflected through the responses of political parties is, therefore, the centrality accorded to State intervention and the imperative of empowerment. It has not been so in the past. The interventions of Phule and Gandhi, for example, reveal different concerns, different emphases. Phule strove to

attack caste hierarchy by attacking it at the level of a cultural-ideological construct also apart from calling for the participation of backward castes in the structures of state power. Gandhi concentrated, on the other hand, primarily on the conscience of the community - his effort was to awaken it to this injustice so as to redress it.

Over the years, however, our perception of the problem of caste backwardness and our definition of social justice have narrowed down. Caste groups are seen today only as beneficiaries of state largesse. The process of this narrowing down of the scope of the debate on caste and social justice must be seen against a larger context. Two important processes can be discerned here. Firstly, ever since Independence, the Indian State has grown both in its power and reach. It has appropriated over the years the right to intervene in almost every sphere of our collective life - be it economic, political or cultural. Consequent to this expansion of state activity has been the growth of the size and importance of the institution of bureaucracy.

The second major process that needs to be taken into account is the percolation of democracy and the changes at the ground level of the equations of power and domination among the different caste groups. Due to, for example, the Green Revolution and the success (though limited) of the land reforms, backward castes, have been able to increase their economic and political power. This increase in power now demands a commensurate share in state power. This has

further been made a possibility through the parallel process of the downward percolation of democracy. Thus, these castes now demand participation in State power through entry into an administrative structure which has still now been dominated by the upper castes. It is a juncture that the political parties seize the opportunity to intervene. Compelled by the logic of competitive electoral politics, parties must consolidate Vote-banks. Cast-coalitions of various kinds form a part of these vote banks. The parties, thus, take up the demands of the backward castes and manipulate them to their best electoral advantage.

The Mandal Commission Report has changed the national political agenda for a long time to come. A whole gamut of issues have been raised in relation to the reservation debate - namely questions of merit, efficiency etc. One need not necessarily identify oneself with these issues with a crusading ardour or a messianic zeal. What needs to be done instead is to stand back and assess the terms of the debate. The debate is a narrowed one, no doubt, occurring as it does only within the framework of state-action. But the system which has been operating hitherto is one that benefits the socially and educationally privileged - not to be understood necessarily as castes. The Mandal Commission to the extent that it calls into question this vital point, certainly has a democratic content.

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