



Social Justice through Inclusion. The Consequences of Electoral Quotas in India

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Social Justice through Inclusion. The Consequences of Electoral Quotas in India

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Electoral quotas for disadvantaged groups were introduced in India after Independence in 1947. They are still in effect and their continued history constitutes one of the most extensive experiments in positive discrimination in the modern world. Francesca R. Jensenius' study of the socio-political consequences of this Indian institution harbours lessons for similar efforts elsewhere. Her question is simple: has the quota system had any effect, and if so how?

The quota system that constitutes the subject of Jensenius' study is for India's Scheduled Castes, popularly known by the abbreviation SCs and previously known as 'untouchables'. The latter term was often to be taken literally – not to be touched. More important than touch was the real and harsh economic deprivation and exploitation this heterogeneous group (not a caste, as Jensenius points out, but many different castes) suffered from, as well as cultural and social marginalisation. Until no more than two generations ago untouchables went periodically and often for months without sufficient food even in years with normal harvest. Today the term Dalit is gaining currency as the term of choice for politically conscious members of these castes. By implication Dalits are assertive and their organs of political representation highly active. Economically and socially things have changed for the better for most SCs. As Jensenius points out, even in terms of personal lifestyle choices (grooming, food, dress), not to speak of their political representation, level of education or general standing in society, the situation for SCs as a group has improved immensely. They are not quite on par with the rest of society, and Indian society is still starkly hierarchical and unequal, but improvements are real and significant.

In Jensenius' convincing analysis, the quota system is partially responsible for this radical change. The system India ended up with was the result of a long political struggle in which many influential voices were opposed or reluctant. In the end, 16 per cent of the new nation's more than five hundred one-man constituencies were reserved for SC candidates. This meant only candidates from SC communities could run for parliament in these constituencies. It is the effect of these reservations that is at the core of Jensenius' concern. A similar quota system was introduced for another marginalised group, the Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes, but these are left out of Jensenius' study.

Jensenius compared the reserved constituencies to constituencies that were non-reserved but had near-similar socio-economic profiles. The fact that constituency boundaries remained unchanged from 1971 to 2001 made the comparison tenable. She supplements the data from this comparison with ethnographic studies, surveys and interviews.

The key finding is that there is no systematic difference, and that the reserved constituencies have done just as well as the non-reserved constituencies. There has been a shrinking gap in the socio-economic standing of SCs and non-SCs in India and Jensenius finds no indication that this process has been slower or quicker in constituencies with an SC member of parliament. Secondly, differences in political participation have lessened to the extent that the previously marginalised SCs now participate in elections sometimes more than non-SCs; the two groups also feel equally represented. And thirdly, the massive changes in social status of SCs can be found in both reserved and non-reserved seats.

The onus of her argument lies in the analysis of why this is the case. She argues that members of parliament from formerly untouchable communities and who represent reserved constituencies, do not necessarily work for the formerly untouchable communities in the constituency. They work for the whole constituency. There was an initial worry that SC members of parliament would be biased towards their own community, but after more than six decades of political negotiations and wrangling, it seems clear from her study that MPs invariably gravitate towards the political centre where they seek to cater to all communities in their constituency. In a sense, the logic of electoral democracy works. The MP and his or her political party will seek broad support, and the party matters more than the community background of the MP. This is perhaps not a surprise, given that Indian constituencies on average have a population of half a million. Also, SC members of parliament themselves experience little or no discrimination. They are treated as other politicians and they are considered by their voters to be doing as good a job as any other MP.

Nonetheless, the MP is a truly significant figure on the Indian political scene, and Jensenius argues convincingly that the design of the quota system, with SC politicians being elected in single-member constituencies by all voters of the constituency, was instrumental in changing attitudes towards SCs. The representation itself was an important symbol, but the design of the system incentivised mainstream political parties to recruit and support SC candidates. And because the SC voters almost invariably constituted a minority of the electorate, the SC candidate had to be acceptable across social dividing lines. It was in the interest of mainstream political parties to reduce or moderate sociocultural gaps.

A strong point in the study is its clear focus, the political seats; and yet this is also a shortcoming. In addition to seats in parliament, the reservation policy also secured access to higher education and government jobs. Some states also made certain subsidies and services available to members of SC communities only. It is this wider context that helps explain why SC status became sought after for other castes, quite in contrast

to its shunned predecessor, the ‘untouchable’. And this wider context also helps explain the dramatic lifting of social status for the formerly untouchable communities. The quota scheme has not been dismantled as was originally intended; it has been maintained and extended. A new category, ‘Other Backward Classes’, was added in the late 1980s and given certain quotas albeit not constituency reservations. Similar quotas have been extended to groups of Muslims and Sikhs.

The quota system was introduced into Indian legislation after years of debate. The practice of untouchability had become an embarrassment and progressive leaders sought ways of eradicating this ignominy. Over the decades that followed, ideas of equality and socialism spread further and the military, the higher education institutions, and the judiciary to mention a few institutions helped reduce social barriers further and make untouchability and caste discrimination illicit. In this wider context, the mechanisms Jensenius points out have played a crucial role.

The lesson from this Indian experiment is that quotas do work. The world-wide debates on reservations for women or ethnic minorities will be significantly enlightened by this study.

Lastly, Jensenius’ findings are particularly interesting because the success is also the cause of the fallout. In India, the growth of the Hindutva forces over the last few years is at least partly caused by the idea that the old Nehruvian state ‘appeased’ and gave special favours to minority groups at the cost of the (perceived) majority, the general caste Hindu. The dissatisfaction with the ideological core of the quota system is disentangled from its success. And Jensenius’ study is clear: positive discrimination policies are undoubtedly beneficial to those they target. But what to some is a correction of old wrongs to others constitutes ‘favouritism’ of special interest groups. In an age of Trump, Brexit and Islamophobia, Jensenius’ study gains a larger importance.

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