

The
Economist

Banyan
Asia

Affirmative action

Indian reservations

Jun 29th 2013, 3:56 by A.R. | DELHI

It has been [a busy week for America's Supreme Court](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21580152-contentious-rulings-voting-rights-and-college-admissions-equality-debated>), as it returned rulings on cases regarding not only gay marriage but also affirmative action (to use the American

euphemism) in the public universities. Our other blogs have handled those decisions in [other](#) (<http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2013/06/affirmative-action>) [entries](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2013/06/affirmative-action-case-0>). Looking ahead to this week two months ago the print edition considered affirmative action from a worldwide perspective. That issue took [a very critical line](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21576662-governments-should-be-colour-blind-time-scrap-affirmative-action>) on the entire phenomenon and paid special attention to examples from [America](#) (<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576658-first-three-pieces-race-based-preferences-around-world-we-look-americas>), [South Africa](#) (<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576655-black-economic-empowerment-has-not-worked-well-nor-will-it-end-soon-fools-gold>) and [Malaysia](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576654-elections-may-could-mark-turning-point-never-ending-policy>). India's experience was judged to be too exceptional—in large part because it does not concern race as such—for consideration in that briefing. But as



America's Supremes have remanded the issue to lower courts for a while longer, we thought this would be a fine time to take a look at the case of castes.

INDIA'S experiment with affirmative action is the world's oldest. Known locally as "reservation" policy it is an elaborate quota system for public jobs, places in publicly funded colleges—like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT)—and in most elected assemblies. These are filled by members of designated, disadvantaged groups.

There are two main intended beneficiaries. Arguably more neglected are the 100m *adivasi*, the 8% of India's population counted as "Scheduled Tribes". Many live in remote or forested corners. Probably more repressed for the centuries in which Hinduism's noxious caste practice has prevailed however are the Dalits, formerly "untouchables". Shunned by other Hindus as polluted for their labours, which included the clearing human and other waste, Dalits remain generally poor and discriminated against. To officials they are members of the "Scheduled Castes".

India's constitution of 1950 enshrined the idea of discrimination as a means to help both "scheduled" groups, which was to build on limited quotas for jobs and education that were used in parts of British-run India from the 1920s. It proposed that the policy exist for a decade to see what progress would be made, but without spelling out how to measure it. The provision has been renewed without fuss every decade since.

Rather than debate whether the practices help, politicians focus on extending them to new blocks of voters. By the late 1980s, after a commission of inquiry, lowly but non-"scheduled" Hindu castes, known collectively as the OBCs for "Other Backward Classes", some 27% of the population, also got quotas. The result: in individual states such as Tamil Nadu or within the north-east, where backward populations predominate, over 80% of government jobs are set aside in quotas, despite a Supreme Court ruling that 50% ought to be the maximum.

Muslims want quotas too, but lack political clout to force them. Women have had a hand up in the political realm: a third of all seats in local elected bodies are reserved for them, after a 1993 constitutional amendment. A bill, supported by Sonia Gandhi, India's most powerful politician, would see it applied in the national parliament too.

The various quotas have partly achieved their most basic tasks. In public jobs members of backward groups claim more posts than of old. Dalits had just 1.6% of the most senior ("Group A") civil servant positions in 1965, for example. That rose to 11.5% by 2011, not far off the 16% or so of the general population that Dalits represent. The share is higher for more junior posts.

Judging a broader impact is harder. Very few Indians have formal jobs, let alone government ones. “The [jobs] policy only matters for perhaps 2% of the Indian work force”, points out Harsh Shrivastava of the World Development Forum, a think-tank in Delhi. Other than in tweaking quotas (to reflect the local size of a “scheduled” population) states have never experimented, nor competed, to find out whether their jobs policies have any wider, beneficial impact.

Worse, the policy has probably helped to make India’s bureaucracy increasingly rotten—and it was already one of the country’s greater burdens. An obsession with making the ranks of public servants representative, not capable, makes it too hard to sack dysfunctional or corrupt bureaucrats. Nor will this improve. In December 2012 parliament’s upper house passed a bill ordering that bureaucrats be promoted not on merit alone, but to lift the backward castes faster.

Private firms are not directly affected, but a few take voluntary measures. The biggest of all, the Tata conglomerate, which employs over 350,000, does in-house surveys to assess its Dalit and tribal work force. Tata gives incentives, setting lower requirements for exam marks, for Dalit and tribal job applicants. Most generally, however, formal jobs in tech and outsourcing firms, for example, are valued in part because they are caste-blind.

Wider consequences may be within education. Quotas and special scholarships for backward groups were first established in the 1920s. For secondary schooling state funds help to encourage more Dalit and tribal children into classrooms; the effect of setting aside special places in colleges and university is to lower the marks needed by Dalit and other backward applicants.

That causes resentment among general applicants, who vie for extremely competitive spots in medical, business and other colleges. But the policy probably does help to propel more Dalits and others to study, as shown in steadily improving rates of literacy and higher qualifications achieved by the groups. A 2009 study found roughly one-in-15 graduates were Dalits, and one-in-ten secondary students, well up on previous decades. Yet that is still too few, as they continue to lag other groups.

Nor is it possible to know just why the numbers have risen. A general programme to build schools and provide a free, midday meal for all pupils, irrespective of caste, probably does even more to help the backward groups. And broad economic changes, such as urbanisation or the use of English, almost certainly do more to boost chances for Dalits and others.

The overall effects therefore are probably limited, and certainly hard to judge. Pratap Bhanu Mehta, an academic at the Centre for Policy Research in Delhi, favours affirmative action but

concludes that a policy focused on distribution of limited state resources is bound to fail. “The current system is not about equal opportunity, it is about distributing the spoils of state power strictly according to caste, thus perpetuating it”, he says.

Nor is any thought given to missed opportunity. Beyond an obsession with quotas, and making untouchability illegal, India’s rulers have done nothing to address ongoing social repression by caste. Village councils, for example in Haryana, in effect outlaw marriages between different castes, or within certain sub-caste groups. The practice of “honour” killings of youngsters who marry against caste rules remains dismally prevalent. Police and politicians show little interest in prosecuting those responsible.

Nor does it help that social mobility of all sorts has been slow in India, mostly because it has remained poor and predominantly rural for so long due to decades of wrongheaded economic policies. For a Dalits peasant or labourer the reservation policy is unlikely to make much difference; getting a job in a factory or a call centre would transform his life.

A tiny minority has prospered, with an estimated 1% of the two “scheduled” groups falling into the highest wealth bracket (calculated as four times above the poverty line), according to a recent study of income data by caste, from 2005. Yet this in turn creates anxiety. If a tiny set flourishes within a broadly disadvantaged group, should it continue to enjoy privileges and quotas from the state?

The Supreme Court, addressing the OBCs in particular, says no. It defined the concept of a “creamy layer” of the wealthiest and most privileged among the OBCs, saying they must now be excluded from quotas. The result: debates flare not only over which backward groups deserve privileges, but over whom within the groups should then be excluded. The result, increasingly, will be a mess.

The creamiest layer of the lot are in politics. Dalits, for example, now serve as parliament’s speaker and as home minister. Most powerful of all—even a potential prime minister—is Mayawati, the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, who heads the Bahujan Samaj Party. She has done much to promote symbols of Dalit strength, often in the form of towering statues of elephants, her party symbol, or of herself wielding a handbag. Yet her success is on the back of electoral clout, not quotas and reservations.

Is there any proof that political reservations bring benefits? Finding any is desperately difficult, since few have ever bothered to assess the impact of India’s affirmative-action policies over the decades.

One 2010 study of 16 of India's biggest states did look at the effect on poverty in backward groups of their getting quotas of representatives, from 1960 to 2000. The report's authors, Aimee Chin and Nishith Prakash, say theirs is the only study ever to ask how an affirmative-action policy, of any sort, has affected poverty in India. Their conclusion: for "scheduled tribes", who are conveniently crowded near one another on electoral maps, greater political clout has indeed led to a small drop in poverty. But for the "scheduled castes", by contrast, it has made absolutely no difference at all.

(Picture credit: AFP)