

Dismantling Discrimination: NRI groups Welcome the Decision, Even if Belated, by the Indian Government to Implement Reservations in Higher Education for the Socially & Economically Backward Classes

You can imagine what would happen if a group of young white professionals and students from some of the country's elite universities held an anti-affirmative action rally, and put on a skit where they caricatured African-Americans and lamented the "deterioration in standards" that would occur if "those people" were "allowed" into universities or hired as federal employees. There would be a media furor and a political firestorm would ensue. But this is precisely what happened last Sunday in California's Silicon Valley except that the performers were Indians and Indian-Americans, and the people being caricatured were the socially and economically disadvantaged communities – officially designated as Other Backward Classes, or OBCs – in India.

OBCs are primarily the lower castes that have been shut out of jobs and education by millennia of systemic caste oppression, and the overwhelmingly upper-caste crowd at Sunday's "protest" was objecting to attempts by India's federal government to make government jobs and elite educational institutions accessible to the OBCs. Protesters used signs, slogans and skits filled with derisive casteist and sexist imagery, all in service of their claim that the quality of education would be diminished if OBCs were to gain access to institutions of higher learning through government sponsorship. What underlies the vehement opposition by the upper castes to attempts by India's elected representatives to ameliorate the condition of the lower castes? Is it just ignorance of the socio-economic realities in India? Or is it a willful refusal to see the caste-imposed disabilities on the majority of India's populace? Is it fear of losing entrenched caste privilege? Or is it, perhaps, just visceral caste-hatred? All were on full display at the rally Sunday at Fair Oaks Park in Sunnyvale, California.

We are appalled by such protests against reservations by some students and urban professionals in India and abroad. While there are legitimate questions related to the specifics of implementing reservation/affirmative action policies in India, fundamentally questioning their need is not an option. The rhetoric of equality of opportunity employed in these protests is disingenuous at best and belies the real goals of this campaign: the defense of structures of privilege that favor an elite minority through the preservation of a corrupt and oppressive socio-economic order where members of upper-caste communities in India continue to monopolize positions of power.

The upper castes, though less than 15% of India's population, constitute 90% of Class I officers (the highest civil service grade) [1], 90% of all High Court judges, [2] and hold over two-thirds of the positions in Indian Media. [3] In contrast, members of lower castes, and the Dalits and Adivasis, who together are more than two-thirds of India's population, mostly live in grinding poverty, have severely limited or no access to education, are malnourished, lack access to health care, labor in outrageous conditions, and continue to face severe social ostracism. Given such a radically asymmetric distribution of power, it is unreasonable and more than a little dishonest for the anti-reservationists to advocate the use of academic "merit" as the criteria for admission. Merit is the product of socio-economic conditions and is intrinsically tied to financial advantages and social support systems enjoyed by students in communities of privilege. We thus understand the proposed reservations as an effort to extend access to education to students of hitherto marginalized communities so that they too may emerge "meritorious".

We also reject the claim that the reservations reinforce caste divisions. Reservations are an acknowledgment that the caste system has marginalized large swathes of the citizenry and state intervention is needed to ameliorate the disabilities imposed by millennia of oppression. Similarly, the call for the exclusive use of economic criteria also involves a collective amnesia on the part of privileged sections of Indian society regarding centuries of oppression. Girish Agrawal, who researches comparative constitutional law and socio-legal history, points out that similar calls to

forget the histories of inequality were heard from Whites when post-Apartheid South Africa tried to undo the damage of a century of racial oppression, and from segregationists in the U.S. when Congress pushed through equal protection and voting rights amendments in the aftermath of the Civil War, and again when the Kennedy-Johnson administrations called for equal access to education and jobs during the Civil Rights era to end the segregation and exploitation of African Americans in the United States.

Some of us from FOSA attended the Fair Oaks Park rally with the intent of challenging some of the myths being perpetrated about the issue of reservations, and to make the case for an educational policy that is just and humane. A majority of the reactions we met ranged from dismissive to abusive, but we were heartened to meet and talk with a handful of attendees at the rally, who, when presented with the facts, seemed open to seeking a better understanding of the underlying issues.

We call on members of the Indian American community to support the long-overdue democratization of access to public education as a means to pursue the goals of true social justice for all the people of India, and to reject ideological positions that seek to further defend upper-caste privilege and the tyrannical socio-economic order that sustains it. Yogesh Verhade, a Dalit Rights Activist who heads the Ambedkar Centre for Justice & Peace said "Reservations are essential to address the extreme marginalization faced by lower caste communities and must be implemented if India is to call itself a democracy". FOSA has proposed a town hall meeting, to be organized jointly with other concerned organizations, where we can engage in informed conversation in order to educate each other about the full range of issues. More details are forthcoming at www.friendsofsouthasia.org.

This update has been released by the [Friends of South Asia \(FOSA\)](#), an organization working toward a multicultural, pluralistic, and hate-free South Asia; [The Ambedkar Centre for Justice & Peace \(ACJP\)](#), a Dalit Rights Group; [The Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America \(FeTNA\)](#); and [The Campaign to Stop Funding Hate \(CSFH\)](#)

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References

1. SCs and OBCs, who constituted 74.7% of the population, only constituted 10.37% of the Class 1 employees - See page15 of http://www.ices.lk/publications/esr/articles_jul97/Esr-Ghosh.PDF
2. See further information on page57of <http://www.ambedkar.org/News/reservationinindia.pdf>
3. According to a recent survey of national media, "Hindu upper caste men" who form 8% of the country's population hold 71% of top jobs and Dalits & Adivasis "are conspicuous by their absence among the decision-makers. Not even one of the 315 key decision-makers belonged to the Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes." Further, OBCs who constitute 40% of the population "account for only 4% of media jobs". See: <http://www.hindu.com/2006/06/05/stories/2006060504981400.htm>

http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/caste/reservations/PressRelease_060906.html