

Social mis-engineering

The very purpose of the Constitution and of giving special attention to the marginalised has been nullified by an indiscriminate caste politics

R BALASUBRAMANIAM

“There is no doubt, in my opinion, that unless you change your social order, you can achieve little by way of progress. You cannot mobilise the community either for defence or for offence. You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole.” These words, written by Babasaheb Ambedkar in his essay, ‘Annihilation of Caste’, are both profound and insightful. While one can draw inspiration from this thought and other ideas that he expresses in this essay, one can surmise that attempts to undo the historical injustice done to the marginalised Dalits, tribals and other caste groups lower down in the social order in India would be to ensure their complete integration into the political, social and economic fabric of the nation.

While the founding fathers kept in mind this deep-seated reasoning and necessity for social engineering while framing the Constitution, caste has been reduced to a mere political tool in the last several decades. The rapidly visible downward slide began when prime postings were driven by caste compulsions around the late 1970s. Whether it is the office of the Chief Minister or the personal sections of each minister, the tendency ever since has been to populate them with people who belong to the same caste as the minister concerned.

What one has begun to see is a dangerous process of social mis-engineering. The consequences of this are not only tragically irrevocable but can potentially undo the constitutionally obligated task of reducing inequities. Whether it is the recent formation of the Maratha or the Veerashaiva Development Boards, or the agitation launched by the Kuruba community demanding

the ST tag, or a monk threatening to agitate for a separate caste-based state, things could not be worse. Politicians alone may not be culpable for this kind of thinking. Religious mutts and casteist organisations thrive on the support given by people of their denominations. It is an open secret that most of them are known to lobby or use their influence to ensure people from their castes occupy high positions in government. It is also known that politicians lobby with religious heads to secure their support and the votes of their followers before every election cycle. The current situation is further worsened by caste-based appointments for heads of universities



and research institutions and even constitutional bodies.

The creation of special purpose vehicles or ‘Development Boards’ is being justified with the reasoning that they will hasten the development of those marginalised and reduce the social and economic gaps. While there is a certain element of truth in this argument, the current levels of efficiency and corruption in the state agencies has ensured that reality is different. No comprehensive evaluation of the SC/ST Development Corporation (one of the earliest to be established) has been done and there is very little evidence to justify the enormous amounts of money spent till date or a calculation of the return on investment in terms of reducing inequities.

The purpose of affirmative action and provisions in the Constitution in terms of the Special Component Plan and the Tribal Sub-Plan was to ensure correction of the historical injustice

meted out to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Today’s decisions are only serving to create injustices which may no longer be politically tenable for correcting in the future. Consider the example of adding two communities – Parivara and Talawara -- to the list of Scheduled Tribes earlier this year in Karnataka. These communities, numbering close to 1.1 million, has further resulted in marginalising the shrinking numbers of forest-dwelling indigenous tribal communities. It is amidst this scenario that one must see the recent trend of several other communities agitating for inclusion. The proverbial Pandora’s box has been opened with the Kodavas (160,000) and Kurubas (more than five million) and other castes like Madiwala, Besta, Golla and Gangamata agitating to get the ST tag, or other dominant caste groups like Veerashaivas and Vokkaligas demanding special privileges and reservations under the Backward Class category.

Most governments till date have seen the process of classifying caste groups and extending special privileges not based solely on their social or economic marginalisation. What drives the decision-making is neither evidence nor constitutional guidelines, but political exigency and potential vote banks. When new castes are added to the ever-growing list of SCs, STs and OBCs, the very purpose of special attention to the extremely marginalised is nullified.

The government is obligated to take care of all citizens but is expected to protect the weak and the marginalised first. It cannot make them weaker in the name of protecting the strong and politically powerful. What we need to do instead is spend serious time and effort in ushering in equality at every opportunity, especially for those who need it the most. Special safety nets based on rational and evidential calculations to restore balance in education and employment will go a long way in bringing in merit-based opportunities, at least a decade from now. What is needed is an evolution amongst religious leaders, the political parties and government leadership, and not a senseless caste-based mis-engineering that will only serve to undermine and stigmatise rather than to bring about equality.

(The writer is Founder-Chairman of the public policy think-tank GRAAM and a visiting professor at Cornell University, USA)