

**IDENTITY, EXPERTISE AND ELECTORAL MOBILISATION:
KARNATAKA'S OBC COMMISSIONS AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF OBC POLITICS IN A REGIONAL DEMOCRACY**

Bhimasheppa Muddapur¹ & Mahalinga K.²

¹Research Scholar, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University,
Tumkuru.

²Associate Professor, DOSR in Political Science, Tumkur University,
Tumkuru.

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ABSTRACT:

The paper examines how Karnataka Other Backward Classes (OBC) commissions have changed caste identity, professionalized knowledge and mobilisation in electoral politics in a regional democracy. The paper argues based on the connections between the Miller Committee (1918-19) and the Chinnappa Reddy Commission and the post-1995 Karnataka State Commission on Backward Classes that the agencies are not mere technical fact-finding units, but political institutions that stabilise and even disintegrate OBC identities by repackaging them. According to their forms of classification, survey exercises and quota prescriptions, commissions give state certified backwardness which parties translate into electoral politics, especially the majority/subaltern OBC blocs. The article has a mixed methodology as a combination of a documentary analysis of a commission report and legislation and the review of current scholarly research on caste politics and affirmative action. It also entails the secondary analysis of 2015 Socio Economic and Educational Caste (SEEC) Survey and the deliberations of the 32/51 per cent reservation change of OBCs.

KEYWORDS:

Karnataka, Regional Democracy, OBC Commissions, Electoral Mobilisation Identity, Expertise.

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Introduction

One of the earliest and most experimental jurisdictions of caste based affirmative action was India, Karnataka, which started with Justice Miller Committee of the Princely State of Mysore and continued with the Backward Class Commissions and Surveys throughout the post-colonial era. These commissions have transformed the fragmented demands of local caste association into an organized field where the percentages and the population number is the primary component of political trading. Such trends of interactions between three processes, as is believed in this article, are the consolidation and re-articulation of caste identities; production of expert, data driven knowledge of backwardness; and mobilisation of OBC groups as electoral constituencies within a competitive regional democracy. As seen in Karnataka which has been at once a pioneering implementation of multi-dimensional standards, the politicised neglect of the enactment of Venkataswamy and the Muslim inclusiveness of the Chinnappa Reddy Commission and the notorious SEEC survey, OBC commissions destabilize and stabilize the caste hierarchies at the same time. This paper has placed these developments in the context of wider analysis of affirmative action, politics of backwardness and emergence of OBC based electoral alliances in India.

Objectives

- To follow the historical development of the Karnataka OBC commissions and explain how the practices of classifications have transformed the OBC identities.
- To discuss how the expert surveys and reports and recommendations of such commissions have had a role in reservation policy design and re-design in the state.
- To test the relationships between commission outputs (reports, categories, percentages) and electoral mobilisation strategies of major political parties in Karnataka.
- To critically evaluate the democratic and social justice implications of the commission centred OBC politics, particularly in relation to intra-OBC inequalities and domination by the domineering caste reactions.

Methodology

The paper is a qualitative, documentary-based research which incorporates historical and analytical methods. Before 1995 Published

summaries and analyses of the Havanur, Venkataswamy and Chinnappa Reddy Commission reports, documents of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes established under the 1995 Act Before 1995 Primary documentary sources Published summaries and analyses of the Havanur, Venkataswamy and Chinnappa Reddy Commission reports, and material of the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes established under the 1995 Act. These have been read along with the recent documents that narrate the contents and the impact of the Chinnappa Reddy commission which found out the socio-economic deprivation and proposed the separate 2B category with the 4 per cent reservation of Muslims.

Articles on backward class movements in Karnataka by academicians, research on whether the state should or should not mention 2015 SEEC survey and proposed 51 per cent OBC quota increase rather than 32 per cent are examples of secondary sources. Other reviews include media commentary and exam-based reviews, which allege the quality of backward class commissions to address structural inequality. The thematic content analysis shows that there are patterns around three axes through which the study finds that similar patterns are present; identity (how communities are named, grouped and ranked), expertise (what methodology and metrics are mobilised to support the claims) and mobilisation (how parties and community organisations utilise outputs of commission in electoral politics). It is more explanatory/interpretive than statistical, in its attempt to draw institutional trends in the context of the bigger shifts in the politics of OBC.

Review of Literature

It is significant that historical work has focused on backward class movements in Karnataka as being centrally concerned with early commissions as being significant in institutionalising the category of backward classes itself. In a paper on backward classes movements (2023), the first work on backwardness, the first Mysore backward classes and later studies such as the Havanur Commission (1975) and the Venkataswamy Commission has been cited as the seminal work in the construction of backwardness as a state policy goal. These organizations have formulated multi-criteria indices basing on social, educational and economic indicators and also predicted technical national argument on Mandal and Indra Sawhney.

According to the analytical writing of Chinnappa Reddy OBC Commission it has identified that OBCs have been in great need of education, employment, and income with the most susceptible being the rural and female races. The commission proposal of better reservations, preferential scholarship and vocational programmes coupled with the name of the Muslims in the 4 per cent category 2B has been recognized as having been a break in such OBC politics in the state, and conversely, stretched OBC politics.

Such knowledge about social justice policies, even though with distinct autonomy and implementation record, is generated at state level backward class commissions, including that created by ISEC and others, but with different autonomy. Remarks about 2015 SEEC survey, and subsequent suggestion to amplify OBC quota to 51 per cent regards the usage of caste-based survey to construct the beginning of quota politics empires and proposes how the prevailing OBC people and the current castes would stand up in opposition or help out such activities.

The newspapers and the policy forums arguments about the so-called efficacy of the backward class commissions point to both the outcomes, namely, expansion of the representation, the policy recommendations which are founded on data as well as the failures, namely, political interference, capture of the elites, and delays in executing them. Similar literature on OBC reservation in the panchayat level occurs in line with the creation of percentage literature on quotas in the local bodies since they apparently add numerical but not substantive empowerment of the OBCs, due to proxy leadership, patronage and the persistence of caste hierarchies.

Taken together, this corpus is a pointer that the commissions of Karnataka OBC are major institutions that argue that there is a boundary between law, bureaucracy and politics. They have helped to make a reservation an effective tool of government, but have also been platforms of struggle between OBC and caste hegemony to monopolise the experience and gratification of backwardness.

Critical Analysis and Subjective Explain the Objectives.

The first goal, the history of commissions and identities, sheds light on a process where a relatively narrow focus on Brahmin-non-Brahmin imbalance of Miller period is progressively divided into dozens

of caste groups categorized under a variety of classifications (I, IIA, IIB, IIIA, IIIB, then 2A, 2B, 3A, 3B). The application of multi-dimensional criteria by Havanur, and the fact that he insisted that certain dominant castes were not backward, is one of the first attempts of expertise to discipline political demands. The later inability to enact open-heartedly Venkataswamy exclusion of Lingayats and Vokkaligas demonstrates that there was a rush to assert the power of electoral factors where the skillfulness categorizing expertise in cases that jeopardized influential blocks. By making the category of Muslims a separate backward category, the Chinnappa Reddy report, in addition to demonstrating the extension of backwardness as a category of inclusive identity, helped lay the germs of future challenge as to whether whole communities of religious people would count as beneficiaries of OBC quotas. In this regard, commissions served as engines of identity, stabilising certain claims, delegitimising other claims, all in the shadow of party politics.

The second goal, which is the analysis of expert surveys and policy formulation, shows that OBC commissions in Karnataka were among the pioneers in adopting survey based, evidence-based approaches. This approach of household level data on education, income and occupation by Chinnappa Reddy and the statewide caste enumeration in 2015 by the SEEC survey, both attempted to take arguments in debates out of anecdote and on to empirically based argumentation. However, as later scandals about the SEEC report have demonstrated, data does not speak outside politics: where they seemed to weaken the demographic imperatives of dominant communities, they were disputed by those communities, whereas where they seemed to illustrate a long-awaited acknowledgement by subaltern OBCs and AHINDA alliances they were celebrated as such. Experience was thereby a two-sided sword--it allowed greater precision in aiming the benefits, but it also acted as the field in which methodological accusations was utilized to agendas related to politics.

The third target – connecting commission outputs with electoral mobilisation underscores the way in which the percentages of reservations, category names and poll results have been incorporated into party politics. The AHINDA project of Congress particularly the leadership of Siddaramaiah, was majorly based on the moral capital of commissions and surveys to validate an OBC minority Dalit consolidation. The BJP in turn responded by dividing this bloc with outreach to so-called micro

OBC groups and their perceived wrongs of quota allocation, or the supposed weakening of OBC benefits by including the Muslim community. The controversy over the raising of OBC quota to 51 per cent based on SEEC data, and the discomfort it caused among the OBC dominating elites and Lingayat-Vokkaliga elites, demonstrate that both commission products and distributive reforms can be legitimised by the same commission products and disrupt current power sharing formulae within parties. Electoral mobilisation based on the concept of backwardness is not, however, a mere extension of the findings of the commissions; strategic re-use of the language of experts by the political.

The fourth goal, which is to assess democratic and social justice implications, calls on a normative verdict on this institutional structure. On the positive side commissions have instilled a norm according to which say that resources are justified by at least nominally empirical information on social and education backwardness. They have put in place institutionalised channels, hearings, surveys, representation requirements whereby deprived groups can express dissatisfaction and bargain with the state rather than resorting to necessarily resorting to protest on the streets, or patronage. Meanwhile, politicisation of commission appointment, slow reporting (as with SEEC survey), selective action on recommendations then give reason to believe that commissions may be one means of postponing conflict or even token action on a demand which may not be followed up in the end. Intra-OBC inequalities as brought up by Chinnappa Reddy and others are also a question of whether commissions have put too much effort to differentiate between the strong OBCs and the most backward ones of the same, or have been unintentionally crafting new hierarchies under the banner of backwardness. The Karnataka experience thus leads to the fact that despite the OBC commissions improving democratic bargain on social justice, they will only work depending on the broader party, movements, and court orientation.

Conclusion

The case of the OBC commissions in Karnataka indicates how the institutions are expected to be created to provide a neutral expert on the problem of backwardness, may over a period of time become the prime level of person in the politics of identity and election mobilisation. The lingo of social and educational backwardness has been standardised by these organs since Miller to Havanur to Chinnappa Reddy and more

empirical justification of the increasing or re-organising of quotas has been served up using templates of multi-layered categorisation. Through it they have empowered the majority of the previously marginalized communities to insist on their rights but they have also opened up new grounds of challenge between OBC sub groups and OBCs and dominant castes. This would be observed in the episode of SEEC survey and the dispute over the augmentation of OBC reservation to 51 per cent, and is a dualism of acknowledgment and anger. It is in the Karnataka OBC politics which used to be a diffuse back class politics but has now taken a complex form of commission reports, category politics, and survey-based bargaining that individual potentials of commission centred affirmative action is seen along with its limitations. Through institutionalisation of consultation, collecting and giving of reasons, commissions can deepen the democratic practice, but unless hyper vigilant on the part of the political desire and social movement, commissions are incomplete, laboured and cherry-picking on their proposals. The experience of Karnataka with caste such cleavages and caste such redistribution calls should be taken into lessons by other regional democracies grappling with the same issue: the possibility of using identity and expertise to deliver social justice and not merely to redefine elite power, but the design, independence and execution of such expert institutions is crucial to this.

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