

Modi's upper-caste reservations card can help get 55 million households voting for him

By: [Sunil Jain](#) | Updated: March 15, 2019 1:50 PM

Instead of winding down quotas, they are being raised, so even less space for the truly meritorious to make it.

Given the RSS view on reservations, many believed that once the [Narendra Modi](#)-led [BJP](#) came to power, it would start unwinding the reservation genie that has not only deepened the caste divide, but is mostly responsible for the deterioration in quality of both education as well as government services; more important, this fitted in with Modi's reputation as someone who was primarily focused on development. Yet, with all parties playing caste politics, and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's anti-reservations comment costing the BJP the Bihar elections in 2015, the RSS too fell in line and the BJP went about increasing its appeal to various caste groups in the same manner that the [Congress](#) party or other caste-based parties like the SP and the BSP did.

So, the party pandered to powerful caste groups like the Jats in Haryana and the Marathas in Maharashtra. It was bad enough that, after various commissions ruled that the powerful Marathas couldn't possibly be considered backward, the BJP managed to get the Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission to classify them as socio-economically backward – the same commission had, in 2008, said the Marathas were economically and politically a forward caste and even the Mandal Commission had classified Marathas as a forward caste.

To add insult to injury, the BJP is not carving out the 16% Maratha quota from the OBC quota – this would make other OBC groups vote against the BJP – but is creating a separate quota; whether this will pass judicial scrutiny remains to be seen, but once mainline political parties pander to this, it is clear India is not going to roll back reservations anytime soon. Indeed, this violates the 50% cap on reservations put by the landmark Indra Sawhney judgment, so the government will have to do some pretty fancy footwork to make this pass. The preferred means of doing this in the past was by putting such legislation under the Ninth Schedule that was out

of the courts' purview, but in the IR Coelho ruling, the Supreme Court introduced the possibility of reviewing Ninth Schedule laws if they violated the Constitutional provision on fundamental rights.

Though, at one level it was fair since OBC quotas are being cornered by powerful caste groups like the Yadavs, Modi is trying to create sub-quotas within the OBC category for the more backward. In Uttar Pradesh, the Justice Raghvendra Kumar panel has suggested that just a fourth of the OBC quota should be kept for powerful groups like Yadavs and Kurmis. It remains to be seen if they will accept this reduction in quotas lying down or whether this will set off another round of violence of the type seen during the days when VP Singh introduced the Mandal reservations.

And now, the government has cleared a 10% quota for the economically backward among upper castes, over and above the 50% cap on that for SC/ST/OBC groups. This segment, data from the PRICE income survey of 2016, has around 55 million households and is, therefore a large vote bank; upper castes are a traditional BJP vote bank and Monday's move will gladden their hearts.

At one level, it will be argued that, unlike the current reservation that is based on caste, this is a step forward since it is based on economic criterion, but that would apply if existing reservation was also changed to economic one – the BJP remains steadfastly opposed to introducing a 'creamy layer' criterion for SC/ST; indeed, it is pushing for reservation in even promotions.

Equally important, while the 50% ceiling came from the Indra Sawhney ruling, the Cabinet deciding to bring in a constitutional amendment means the principle has been overturned and the power now rests with Parliament – once this is done, any other government, including the BJP, can raise this at will. At another level, the 50% cap meant that merit would at least get half a chance at the best education and jobs; this lakshman rekha has now been crossed.

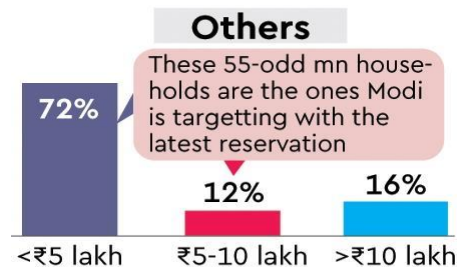
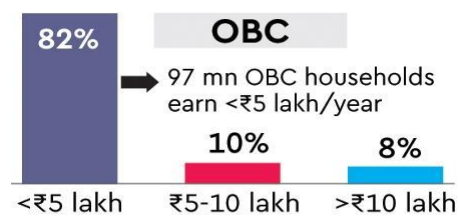
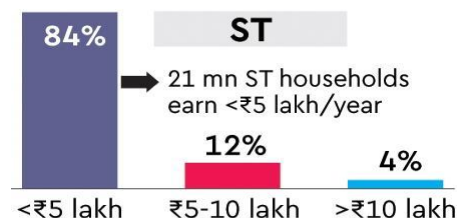
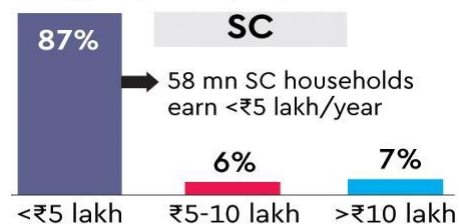
While the government and the BJP will justify their decision by arguing that the poorer upper castes weren't getting a fair deal and felt left out, and it was a bad government policy that led to this demand; so logically, good government policy would have helped rebottle this genie. Even today, though a little less so, government policy actively discourages top-class educational institutions from coming up in the private sector; in the event, with a limited number

of good educational institutions available, the demand for caste-based reservations grew stronger; for all its promises, the Modi government has been slow to relax this government chokehold.

The clamor for government jobs, and a reservation within this, has grown because of the fact that such jobs pay 2-3 times what the private sector does at the lower- to mid-level, and with virtually no obligation to perform. With this difficult to fix, and with private sector jobs not growing fast either, the government has in fact argued for quotas even in promotions in government jobs. Anyone looking for a winding down of reservations has to be quite disappointed since this decision makes it likely that reservations aren't going away in a hurry, indeed they are likely to keep increasing.

Caste Calculus

(% households in different income categories, ₹ lakh per year)



Source ICE 360 survey (2016), PRICE