

Book Review – *Why Representation Matters: The Meaning of Ethnic Quotas in Rural India*, by Simon Chauchard.

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Despite being one of the most logical and essential policies in a welfare state, positive discrimination resiliently remains a matter of passionate debate in popular discourse. Sometimes, it is witnessed, the waves of this popular discourse actually carry into legal domains. Two recent policies in India bear testimony to this phenomenon. The Maharashtra legislature granted a reservation¹ for Marathas, an erstwhile culturally and economically dominant caste community, in state educational institutions and government jobs. On the other hand, the union government introduced a 10% reservation for a new category, termed the Economically Weaker Section (EWS), in central educational institutions and government jobs. The EWS category has been defined as those not belonging to the already reserved categories of Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) or Other Backward Classes (OBC) and whose annual family income is below eight lakhs. Vehemently criticised by academics, activists, lawyers and other intellectuals, these policies have been introduced against the backdrop of numerous studies and even government censuses and family surveys that clearly demarcate differential socio-economic status of historically marginalised groups of SC, ST and OBC. In this context, Chauchard's book brings a unique perspective to the literature on reservations by exploring the nuances of the psychological effects of reservation policies.

An output of his PhD study, Chauchard's book argues that reservations have a positive impact

¹ The term 'reservation' implies a quota of seats being set aside, 'reserved,' for the mentioned category in educational or political institutions or in job appointments in the specified institutions or in representation in any specified domain. It is common parlance in Indian legal and everyday communication. Refer to pages 8, 122, 131, 132, 141, 142, 200, 201, 202 and 204 of Indian Constitution.

on the psychology of intergroup relations, thereby improving the nature of day-to-day interpersonal relations. Chauchard's study, incorporating a combination of focus groups, observation methods, informal interviews and two Large-N surveys, was conducted in 2009 in the Indian state of Rajasthan, focusing on male village-level council presidents or sarpanches belonging to the SC category. Through his qualitative data, Chauchard theorises that reservation policies can positively impact interactions between disadvantaged groups benefitting from the policies and the dominant groups around them through two mechanisms. Chauchard defines one of these as the 'strategy mechanism,' developed through perceived social and/or legal norms of intergroup interactions. That is, if the dominant groups perceive that they can get away with discriminatory behaviours, they will continue to do so, but will refrain from doing so if they believe the socio-legal environment is stringent. He defines the second one as the 'taste mechanism,' consisting of deeply rooted beliefs or stereotypes. A positive change through this mechanism implies building an actual appreciation for members of reserved groups.

Testing his theory through the two surveys—one each with members of SC and dominant castes—Chauchard reveals that reservations activate strategy mechanism(s) rather than taste mechanism(s). Stereotypes, self-stereotypes and prejudice remain negative when dominant groups tend to perceive that hostile behaviours towards SCs can attract legal sanction. Chauchard, however, argues that even the limited changes triggered through strategy mechanism meaningfully impact everyday intergroup behaviours. Dominant groups of villages having experienced reservation are less hostile than those of villages not having experienced reservation. Similarly, SC members from the villages having witnessed reservation are more assertive and less deferential than their counterparts in villages not having experienced reservation.

Chauchard's book is organised into nine chapters. The first two chapters introduce his study and give an extensive literature review, the next two give insights and theory from his qualitative research and the following four describe his quantitative methods and their findings. The last chapter examines the validity of his findings and their implications for institutional reforms.

Chauchard's book unveils important terminology that can be employed in the conceptualisation of psycho-social dynamics of intergroup perceptions. However, his research enquiry does not arise from a strong contextual foundation. Caste, as a reality, exists in the form of a social hierarchy deeply entrenched through centuries of axiological, religious, lingual, economic and knowledge

domination systems. As noted by Guru (2009, p. 16), “humiliation is not so much a physical or corporeal injury; in fact, it is more a mental/ psychological injury that leaves a permanent scar on the heart.” Changes in these systems happen gradually through cultural activism, concerted political dissent and forces of diffusion brought in through urbanisation, globalisation and economic democratisation. Social policy is a combined reflection of the founding ethos of the nation-state—liberty, equality and fraternity, in India’s case—and the composition of ruling regimes. India currently favours upper caste Hindus due to the ideological inclination of its ruling party which implemented the EWS and Maratha reservations. The dominant psycho-social dynamics are, therefore, shaping the reservation policy rather than the other way around. This contextual reality contradicts the logic of measuring psychological impact of reservation policies. Consequently, even the finding that reservations trigger only strategy mechanism(s) and not taste mechanism(s) is not revelatory.

In his literature review, a very commendable effort, while Chauchard discusses empirical studies such as Chattopadhyaya and Duflo at length, he mentions theoretical and commentative works such as those of Ambedkar, Phule and Guru only in passing. A deeper engagement with these works would have enabled Chauchard to frame his query more sharply. Secondly, Chauchard’s study suffers a major drawback in terms of respondent demography. Even while he clearly states logistical difficulties as a cause, the exclusion of female respondents cannot be ignored while evaluating findings of his study. As is widely acknowledged, gender and caste combine to produce deepened levels of discrimination. Hence, by not including the voice of this doubly discriminated sub-community, Chauchard’s findings suffer from a demographic and thereby socio-cultural bias. Lastly, the attempt to measure the redistributive effect of the reservations does not seem to align with the psychological focus of the study. In chapter four, Chauchard himself theorises that reservations are unlikely to have a major redistributive effect, while in chapter six he states that the small sample size does not allow him to arrive at a decisive conclusion on potential distributive effects. The very rationale of including questions on this theme in the survey design is, therefore, questionable.

Chauchard’s study is yet an important one that pursues its objectives rigorously. This is certainly reflected in his exhaustive discussion on terminology and his review on the domain of reservations. The innovativeness and intensiveness of his research design are also noteworthy. Recording survey questions in the local dialect and administering them to respondents in complete

privacy is a unique data collection method that could be emulated by researchers, even those from backgrounds similar to that of respondents. For these reasons, Chauchard's study is undoubtedly one that cannot be ignored by scholars and students of political systems. Even general readers will be enriched in terms of understanding the dynamics between values and prejudices of people, social policy and its implementation and social research.

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