

## Between ignorance and deception: Sathish Deshpande's idea of reservations

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Clearly, advocates of the caste-based reservation system are worried by the recent upheavals in Gujarat and beyond. In his "The Patidar idea of reservations" (*The Hindu*, 5 September), Delhi University sociologist Satish Deshpande attempts to ridicule the Patidars' demand for OBC status while expressing his support for the reservation system. In this piece, I do not wish to defend or attack any particular movement, such as that of the Patidars or the Gujjars, but merely draw attention to one simple point: Deshpande attempts to defend ignorance and immorality by drawing on arguments that exhibit the same properties.

Deshpande's story is built around a distinction between what he calls the constitutional view and the Patidar view of reservations. The former is all about redressing caste discrimination and inequality; the latter suggests that "any caste can get reservation if it has the power to bend the state to its will." Originally, Deshpande says, "reservation was meant to repudiate the religiously sanctioned apartheid and oppression of caste society, and to establish the community of formal equals that is a precondition of nationhood." Let us study this claim in some detail, since it is so central to his argument.

The apartheid and oppression of caste society are *religiously sanctioned*, Deshpande claims. Indeed, this was once a common thesis of eighteenth-century missionary pamphlets and nineteenth-century Indological treatises. However, no knowledgeable Indologist or competent scholar of religion would today make the claim that caste in India is religiously sanctioned. This view has no credibility left, because scholars in both domains have shown that it reproduces a Protestant-Christian critique of 'the false religion of the Hindus' in secular garb and then tries to sell this as knowledge about Indian society. But how could a present-day intellectual reproduce discredited clichés from centuries ago? The answer is obvious: only if he is ignorant of the relevant domains of study. Now, ignorance of a domain is not a problem. I also know nothing about the domains of pharmacology and physiology. Yet, if I were to prescribe medicines to patients on the basis of this ignorance, then I engage in something worse: deception. Deshpande does the same: he presents falsity as truth to defend caste-based reservations; thus, he engages in deception as a sociologist.

'Apartheid' is a Dutch word, which entails that one sees the difference between two objects ('*apart zijn*') as a property of those objects ('*apartheid*' or 'the property of being separate'). Now, there are no scientific or philosophical objections to this view: 'father' denotes the relationship of being a father *of*, whereas we ascribe the property of fatherhood to an individual. This is a permitted way of transforming a relational property between two entities into a dispositional property of one of the two entities. What then is the problem with 'apartheid'? The only criticism one can have against apartheid refers to particular empirical policy decisions taken by the South-African government at some point of time. But then apartheid can be generalized, if and only if one shows that some authority in India at some point took policy decisions identical in nature to those of South Africa. Of course, this is obvious only if one knows Dutch; ignorance of a language is usually not a good ground for moral preaching in the terms of that language.

Were reservations then necessary to “establish the community of formal equals that is a precondition for nationhood”? This involves two claims: caste discrimination obstructed the constituting of a community of formal equals and this in turn prevented the Indian nation from coming into being. Therefore, redressing caste discrimination (through reservations) was a necessary precondition for nationhood. Wherever one may travel in this world, in every nation under the sun, there is discrimination between groups that are not just social classes. In the United States, for instance, there are ethnic groups (Asian-Americans, Indian-Americans, WASPs), linguistic groups (Hispanics), and religious denominations (Baptists, Catholics, Unitarians). In India, there are caste groups. In some cases, these are united neither by language, territory, or even religion (like Jain Brahmins, for example). In America, apparently, the existence of empirical groups and the undeniable discrimination among them do not prevent nationhood. How could caste discrimination then prevent India from becoming a nation?

The idea that members of a nation should all belong to one and the same community, without discrimination, makes sense only in one context: the idea of the nation as it exists in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The believers of these three religions are united as a community in God, where they relate to each other as equals: the chosen people of God for the Jews, the *communitas* or *ecclesia* for the Christians, and the Umma for the Muslims. Each is a Jew or a Christian or a Muslim only *in God*. As such, in each of these communities, there is formal equality of all and this is what makes them a nation. Is the problem then that most Indians do not belong to one of these three religions? Is Deshpande saying that they should?

Drawing on his ‘constitutional view’, Deshpande ridicules the Patidar idea that political clout determines whether a group gets access to caste reservations. But how does he have access to the true intention of the lawgiver or the genuine view that constitutes the constitution? How does he know that the Patidar idea of reservations was not the real intention of the lawgiver? Let us admit that some members of the Constituent Assembly shared ‘the constitutional view’. This does not show that this was the consensus or majority position of its members. During the decades before 1947, most people also knew that one could get benefits such as reservations from the British colonial state, if one had the required political clout. Today, Deshpande says, most people are probably unaware of the constitutional view and think like the Patidars. When this is the majority opinion both before and after Independence, how do you know that the majority of the members of yesterday’s Constituent Assembly and today’s parliament accept(ed) the constitutional view? How can you show that the proclamations of a couple of members are not simply expressions of opposition to the majority view (‘the Patidar idea’)? You cannot. Thus, it is advisable that sociologists do not try to play the role of the sovereign lawgiver (or worse, usurp the place of God).

The Patidar idea of reservations was not always the same: they shifted from opposing caste-based reservations in the 1980s to demanding them today. Why? The answer is simple for Deshpande: the dominant groups in Gujarat first pioneered “the rhetoric of merit” and are now giving up “the sanctimony of merit,” because they are facing more and more competition. Apparently, merit is no more than ‘rhetoric’ and ‘sanctimony’. This could entail two things: either one says that there are some domains where the conditions of entry have nothing to do with what merit is (namely, more knowledge, skill, capacities, competency ... than other candidates) or one means to say that this is the case in all domains.

No matter what Deshpande intends, the unfortunate fact is that reservations in India are imposed onto institutions where merit is absolutely necessary: schools, universities, the bureaucracy, and public firms. Instead of merit, the reservation system draws on extra-cognitive conditions. Since cognitive conditions are essential to these institutions, however, one is compelled to bring them in again, but one does so in the inverse way: incompetence, ignorance and being deskilled become the criteria for entry. By adding caste certificates as the sole criterion, one simply conceals the fact that these three are now the criteria.

There is more deception involved: by drawing on cognitive criteria in this perverse way and acting as though one uses other criteria, one is blinded to the fact that the system has totally perverse effects. The use of non-cognitive criteria encourages more and more people not only to try to satisfy these criteria (by getting caste certificates) but also begin to live up to the cognitive criteria actually used (ignorance and incompetence). In other words, they simply try to live up to the standards demanded by the system. This is the growing tendency.

This explains why reservations do not cause movement from the reserved categories to the general category; instead, they reinforce movements in the other direction. That is also why we see ever more demands to increase the percentage of the reserved seats and reduce that of the general category, rather than the other way round. To use political clout to do so is simply to add another non-cognitive criterion to the already existing one. Given these facts, the general category cannot and will never reflect the caste composition of India, even though this is the goal of the reservation system and the precondition for its abolition, according to Deshpande.

Like the reservation system itself, Deshpande's discourse embodies the art of skillfully moving back and forth between ignorance and deception. That the demonstration of this art has apparently become the condition of entry for a social science professorship at Delhi University merely confirms what I have said so far. If this is the level of Indian sociology today, then it does not bode well for the future.

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