CASTE, INEQUALITY AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

André Béteille
Caste, inequality and affirmative action
Caste, inequality and affirmative action

by

André Béteille

International Institute for Labour Studies
Geneva
Preface

This paper is based on a lecture by Professor André Béteille of the University of Delhi, given at the ILO in Geneva on 21 February 2002. The talk was followed by an extended session for questions and answers. The Institute would like to thank Professor Béteille, for making available the transcript for publication.

André Béteille served as Professor of Sociology in the University of Delhi where he taught since 1959. His research interests include stratification and social class, equality and social justice and race, caste and ethnicity. In addition to papers in scholarly journals, he has published Caste, Class and Power (1965); Castes: Old and New (1969); The Idea of Natural Inequality and other Essays (1983); Essays in Comparative Sociology (1987); Society and Politics in India (1991); The Backward Classes in Contemporary India (1992). His most recent publications are: Chronicles of Our Time (Penguin Books, 2000), Antinomies of Society (Oxford University Press, 2000), Sociology (Oxford University Press, 2002) and Equality and Universality (Oxford University Press, 2002).
Caste, inequality and affirmative action

André Béteille

I am really very happy to be here with you this afternoon but I also feel a bit daunted by the magnitude of the task that is assigned to me. I am going to talk about caste, inequality and affirmative action, all in the course of 45 minutes. These are really three separate topics, although they are related to each other. I take it that your main interest is in affirmative action and I will pay special attention to that subject. Some of you may be familiar with the programme of affirmative action in the United States and in other countries. There are many distinctive features of the programme in India, and in order to appreciate these features and understand how the programme has been faring in the last several decades, it is necessary to know something about the structure of society and the problems which the programme seeks to address.

Each one of these topics – caste, inequality and affirmative action – is large and complex. I will begin with caste, and I will try to indicate the basic features of the system. It is true that caste has given rise to a massive programme of affirmative action in India, but there are also programmes of affirmative action which have been devised in other contexts where caste does not exist. So caste has to be understood to some extent on its own terms.

Certainly, the caste system is changing. I think that is about the only point on which the specialists are agreed. What is the direction in which it is changing? There are sharp disagreements on that. Some would say, and this is my opinion, that if you take a long-term view of caste, the indication is that it is becoming weaker and not stronger, taking the system as a whole. But there are others who would argue that state action has in fact increased the strength of caste. So even on that point there are disagreements among the authorities and I do not want to discuss these disagreements today – whether caste is becoming stronger or weaker, whether affirmative action is making caste stronger or making it weaker. This is an argument which is debated over and over again in India. Some say that affirmative action is essential, it is necessary in order to eliminate, or at least to reduce, the inequalities that have been inherited from the past. Others say that affirmative action in fact reinforces the sense of separate identity between members of different castes.

Now caste, of course, is closely related to inequality but inequality is not all there is to caste. There are many other aspects of caste which need to be considered at least briefly. And inequality is not simply a matter of caste. There are other aspects of inequality in Indian society which are extremely important. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, after the country became independent, there were sharp disagreements between Marxists and liberal theorists as to whether, in fact, caste was the real basis of
inequality in Indian society. Some would say that it was, while others would say that the real basis of inequality was the ownership, control and use of land. For the latter, it was the agrarian social structure which provided the real basis of inequality in Indian society. In other words, there are aspects of caste which can be discussed independently of the issue of inequality, and there are aspects of inequality which can be discussed independently of caste.

I will try to bring together caste and inequality and to present the programme of affirmative action in the context of our understanding of the inequalities of caste that continue to exist. Many students of Indian society have argued that caste was the country’s fundamental social institution. If there was anything which gave Indian society its distinctive features, it was the caste system and caste was the basis of Hindu society over a very long period. It was very much tied up with Hindu attitudes towards ritual purity and pollution, to Hindu conceptions of hierarchy as the basic order of society, and in that sense they would say that caste is the fundamental institution of Hinduism, that it represents the social morphology, so to say, of Hindu society. Hinduism is a religion whose social aspect is expressed in the division of the population into castes and subcastes of many different kinds.

Caste has existed in India, particularly among the Hindus, over a very long period of time. It has long been a subject of discussion, and not simply among contemporary or modern social theorists. Caste was extensively discussed in the classical literature of Hinduism which tried to explain and even to justify the system. So there has been an elaborate discussion over a long period of time of the logic of caste, so to say. If you look at medieval European history, you will find elaborate discussions of the logic of the feudal system and the “estates”. But India has a much greater continuity over time in the discussion of caste. So it was in that sense the definitive institution of Hindu society.

Caste was not confined to the Hindus and this is something which must be kept in mind. Divisions of a kind which are very similar to the divisions of caste among the Hindus have existed also among the Muslims in India and on the subcontinent over a very long period of time. When the British administrators began to construct a social map of India, they used their 10-year censuses as occasions for writing about the division of the population into its basic groups and communities. These census reports which start from the end of the nineteenth century provide very interesting information on the divisions and subdivisions of Indian society. The census of 1921, which, of course, was of undivided India, had a special report on caste among the Muslim population. The detailed discussion of what the census commissioner described as caste among the Muslims generated a strong reaction from the Muslim intelligentsia who argued that caste was antithetical to the principle of Islam. How could one talk about caste among Muslims in India? But in the course of time, most students of Indian society and of the subcontinent have come to accept that caste-like divisions exist not only among the Muslims but also among Christians and other religious communities. They also exist in incipient form among the tribal communities in India.

The division of the population into a large number of groups which were ranked in some kind of a hierarchy was found throughout India and it was not confined to the Hindus. But of course, it was only among the Hindus that you found not simply the practice but also the theory of caste. Over a period of 2000 years, the Hindus had developed a model of society in which the hierarchical division of the population was regarded as constitutive of their society and indeed of human society as such. It is
distinctive of caste among the Hindus that you have not only the practice of caste, not only the division of society into innumerable groups, but you also have a theory which seeks to describe, explain and justify these divisions.

When one uses the term “caste” in English, one is actually translating two distinct terms in the classical as well as the modern languages of India. The first term is varna and the second is jati. Varna and jati have both been described as caste. They are not unrelated to each other but they are not the same, and it is very important to understand the distinction between the two in order to understand the social logic of caste. The scheme of varnas has been elaborated in India among the Hindus for at least 2000 years. It has no counterpart among the other religious communities, and that is extremely important. The theory of varna lays down the logic of the system just as many medieval texts laid down the logic of the system of estates in medieval Europe. According to these classical texts and also according to later accounts, there were four and only four varnas – Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. These are the four varnas and they are ranked in the order shown. The distinctive feature of the system of varnas is that it was believed to be invariant, to be present throughout the country, throughout the length of the subcontinent. It was the same order, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra which was believed to prevail throughout the country. Further, it was not only invariant, it was also believed to be permanent. The same order of the social world divided into Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra remained unchanged over the centuries.

When we look at the history of modern India, we realize that the traditional order of varnas may not change, but it becomes obsolete. Fewer areas of life tend to be governed by varna than was the case in the past. And one can see this obsolescence of the social order of varnas in the course of the last 50 years. Discussions of caste in the regional languages in India make less and less use of the category of varnas. If one talks to modern Indians, if one looks at the newspapers, the discussion of caste is no longer in the language of varnas as was the case until the middle of the nineteenth century. Today the discussion of caste is in the language of jati which is the other aspect of caste.

Now, what are jatis? I said that there are four and only four varnas – Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra – but the jatis are innumerable. I myself studied a village in South India in the early 1960’s. In that one single village, there were as many as 35 or 36 distinct jatis. If you take the region as a whole, you might find the population divided and subdivided and sub-subdivided into a couple of hundred different jatis. So, they are numerous and they are ranked, but the order of ranking is not as tidy or as rigid as the order of ranking of the varnas. Not only that, the jatis are not the same in all parts of the country. They vary from one part of India to another. Each region has its own distinctive complement of jatis, and, whereas the varnas are believed to have been unchanging and immutable, we know that new jatis were being created and old jatis were dying out all the time. So, it is a much more flexible and dynamic system than the system of varnas.

Today, when one talks about caste in India, one is really talking about jatis rather than varnas. What does this mean in sociological terms? It simply means that when one talked about varnas, one talked about the hierarchy that not only existed in fact, but also had a certain legitimacy in the normative order of society. Whereas, when one talks about jatis, one is talking about divisions of a kind which do not enjoy the legitimacy that the system had in the past. If I may use an analogy from other societies,
I would say that the system of *varnas* corresponded to the medieval system of estates. “The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate.” That is a Church of England hymn, as a matter of fact. It is a system whose legitimacy is accepted and taken for granted. In contrast, the *jatis* operate rather like the ethnic groups in the United States do. The differences must also be noted: the *varna* order had far greater stability and continuity over time than the system of estates in medieval Europe did, and the system of *jatis* in contemporary India is far more elaborate than the system of ethnic groups in the United States.

There is a ranking of *jatis* but there is a difference between groups which are ranked in terms of de facto criteria and the social hierarchy whose basic principles are accepted generally, if not universally, in society. If one looks at the traditional order of Hindu society and of Indian society in general, I would say that it was a hierarchical social order in the sense that inequalities not only existed, but that they were accepted as right, proper and desirable. All this was considered to be part of the natural scheme of things, not just inequalities between the *varnas* but also between the *jatis*, because the *varna* system provided a kind of framework, a benchmark for ranking the different *jatis*. It was considered right, proper and desirable that they should be ranked in this way. This applied not just to the ranking of *varnas* and *jatis*, but also to the ranking of men and women. That was the traditional order, it was the most complete and the most elaborate hierarchical social order known to human history. And the legitimacy of ranking was taken for granted by and large. It was questioned from time to time, but over a long historical period the legitimacy of this ranking of *jatis* and *varnas* was taken for granted in the classical, legal and religious literature of Hinduism. There is a whole range of classical legal texts which lay out the basic principles of the hierarchical order, but the epitome is to be found in the *Manusmriti* or the *Manavadharmashastra*. In the entire literature, the logic of caste is explained and the *Manusmriti* gives the blueprint of a quintessentially hierarchical society.

Today, the Constitution of India provides a blueprint for an egalitarian society. The Constitution is not based on the premise of hierarchy, but on the premise of equality. But of course, you do not just erase or cancel out age-old inequalities simply by adopting new principles in a Constitution. So what else has to be done in order to reduce the inequalities of the past? This is what affirmative action or positive discrimination addresses itself to. The object is to reduce the level of inequality in a society which has had a hierarchical order over a very long period of time. Affirmative action or positive discrimination was not the only major programme adopted when the country became independent and created a Constitution based on the premise of equality. For example, there was a massive programme of agrarian reform which was also designed to give greater thrust to the pursuit of equality. I would say that these were the two main programmes – agrarian reform and affirmative action – designed to improve the conditions of what came to be known as the backward classes in Indian society.

I have often been asked outside India about the insensitivity of Indians in using a term like this – the backward classes. It shows a certain kind of insensitivity and I have often been asked if I feel embarrassed to use this phrase when talking about a section of my own society. Well, yes and no. The term ‘backward’ has become a fighting word in India today so it is not necessarily something that one wants to sweep under the carpet. It has become a fighting word although it was not always a fighting word and this question of terminology, in fact, bedevilled the administrators of India even before independence. One major component of the backward classes consists of
those who are called Dalits today, or the Untouchables or the Harijans as Mahatma Gandhi called them. J. H. Hutton, a distinguished anthropologist who was also the commissioner for the 1931 census, wrote that this section of the Indian population had come to be called the ‘depressed classes’, which was an odious phrase to use in to reference to a whole section of society. He was very unhappy with the term and favoured ‘exterior castes’ in its place. Finally, the Government of India in 1935, that is before independence, settled for ‘scheduled castes’. Thus, the policy of positive discrimination in India, which I am going to talk about, has antecedents in colonial rule. It was not created ex nihilo with the Constitution of India. It has antecedents in colonial rule and right from that time we see the two faces of positive discrimination, a desire to bring about greater equality, greater social justice as well as a desire to use it as an instrument for devising politics. It has also been used as an instrument of divisive politics since independence.

Successive governments in independent India have used positive discrimination as an instrument for furthering specific political ends. So, what is tantalizing about positive discrimination in India is that it is not just a question of furthering social justice, it is also a question of maintaining a certain balance of power between different groups in society. This did not start with independence and the adoption of a new Constitution. In fact it started at least 30 years before the new Constitution was adopted. So, what is this programme of positive discrimination which has such a long history in India? I will now very briefly indicate the basic features of positive discrimination before I invite questions. I am often asked: “Is positive discrimination a good thing or is it a bad thing?” I think it is impossible to give a blanket answer to that question because the programme is so large and so elaborate and has so many different aspects that almost inevitably one sees that some parts of it are good, other parts are not so good and it is very difficult to disentangle what is good in positive discrimination from what is not. It is not easy to determine how much it has contributed to reducing inequalities and how much it has contributed to the heightening of rivalries, tensions and hostilities between groups. If one wants to examine it more closely, I think there are two distinctions that have to be kept in mind. The first relates to the beneficiaries of positive discrimination – that is to say, those groups for whose benefit the programme of positive discrimination has been constructed and elaborated over the last 80 years. So one must get some idea of the interested beneficiaries of positive discrimination. They are not a single homogeneous block; in fact, they are very diverse and one must keep this diversity in mind in order to evaluate the success and the failure of positive discrimination. One might take the view that positive discrimination is justified in the case of some of these groups, but not in the case of others. Secondly, one has to distinguish between the different kinds of programme that come under the broad policy of positive discrimination; here, one might say that positive discrimination is justified in certain areas of public life but not in others. At least, one must have some appreciation of the wide range of the beneficiaries of positive discrimination as well as a sense of the variety of policies which come under the umbrella of positive discrimination.

Let me first say something about the intended beneficiaries of positive discrimination, who are broadly known as the backward classes. Who are the backward classes? They are not a single homogeneous block, and this must always be kept in mind. And what must also be kept in mind is that the backward classes are not really classes in the ordinary sociological sense of the term. They are really groups of communities and not classes. These groups of communities fall into three broad divisions: firstly, there are the scheduled tribes, secondly, there are the scheduled castes and thirdly, there are the other backward classes (OBCs).
Let me very briefly give you an idea of these three divisions among the backward classes. The smallest group consists of the scheduled tribes. In a very rough way, they can be compared to the native American population of the United States but the analogy is deceptive beyond a certain point. They are the tribal population of Indian society and they are the smallest division of the backward classes. However, although they only comprise a little over 8.5 per cent of the population, that means over 85 million people. That is not a very small population by the standards of European countries or by the standards of countries anywhere in the world. The scheduled tribes are very diverse, and this is directly relevant to the discussion, because the critics of positive discrimination point out that in India, it benefits not the most disadvantaged members of the backward classes but the least disadvantaged among them.

The scheduled tribes constitute the smallest section of the backward classes. The next consists of what are known as the scheduled castes. Whereas the scheduled tribes have been isolated in hill and forest areas, the scheduled castes have been segregated. They have been very much a part of the economy of land and grain on which Indian society was based. But they were segregated and were not allowed access to many civic amenities. They were denied access to education and the other advantages through which one could achieve success in economic and social life. They comprise over 16 per cent of the population, so around 165 million persons. But they are also highly divided. First of all, they are regionally divided. India is a country of many regions, each with its own distinctive language, and the scheduled castes are divided by language just like the rest of the population, although they come at the bottom of the hierarchy. This means that there is a distinction between the scheduled castes of Tamil Nadu who speak Tamil like the non-scheduled caste population of Tamil Nadu and the scheduled castes of Bengal who speak Bengali. Even if we confine our attention to the scheduled castes of one particular region, there also we will find a considerable amount of differentiation as well as ranking. The ranking of castes did not stop at the boundaries of untouchability, it went right down. So the scheduled castes or the so-called untouchables were themselves also ranked. It is this that makes the problem of the scheduled castes quite different from the problem of the blacks in the United States. It is this that makes the problem of administering a policy of positive discrimination so much more difficult and so much more complex in the Indian case because the benefits of the programme tend to be gathered not by the weakest among the scheduled castes but by the strongest among them. There are analogies to this in the affirmative action programme in the United States. But in India the problem is far more complex.

Finally, there are what are called the “other backward classes”. The Constitution of India was drawn up at a time when the country had been partitioned on the basis of religion so the mood was against further divisiveness. Therefore, in the Constitution of
1950, special provisions were only made for the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. But it did not stop there because one of the directive principles of state policy said that some measures may also be adopted for the benefit of other backward classes without specifying what these measures should be and who the other backward classes were. So commissions were set up and as a result we have today a third section of the backward classes consisting once again of numerous castes and communities, which are even more diverse in their economic and social standing than the scheduled castes or the scheduled tribes and which are known as the other backward classes. They comprise anything between 25 to 50 per cent of the population.

One can give exact figures for the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes, but not for the other backward classes. What the British did was to enumerate all castes and communities throughout the country. At the time of independence it was felt that the benefit of this was outweighed by the divisive implications of enumerating caste in the census. So the enumeration of castes was discontinued in the censuses from 1951 onwards with the exception of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, who have been enumerated separately. So these are the three broad divisions, very different in their social standing. Some of the other backward classes are and have been politically dominant in their areas although their social and ritual standing in the traditional hierarchy was not very high. Whereas the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes, one would agree on the whole, have been severely disadvantaged and deprived, this is not true, or not true to the same extent, of the other backward classes.

These groups are the intended beneficiaries of positive discrimination. What are the benefits? There are three main kinds of benefit and I will just enumerate them and then stop. The first is what may be described as political reservation. This means that a certain number of seats in Parliament and in the state legislatures are reserved for members of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, roughly in proportion to their strength in the population. Political reservation in Parliament and in the state legislatures is only for the benefit of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, not for the other backward classes. Political reservations are written into the Constitution of India and the provisions reveal the ambivalence of the makers of the Constitution as well as of policy makers in contemporary India. The constitutional provisions for political reservations for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are mandatory. That is, the Constitution says that ‘seats’ shall be reserved in Parliament for such and such. However, when the provisions were made mandatory in 1950, it was decided that this would apply only for ten years, so they would last for a single decade. But since then the Constitution has had to be amended every ten years to keep on extending political reservations for the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. I think the general idea is that these should not be written into the Constitution permanently, that at some future time the need for these special provisions will no longer exist. But that future seems to be moving further and further away. So that is political reservation.

The second kind of reservation which is even more contentious than the first is known as job reservation. Job reservations apply mainly to government appointments at union and state level and also to organizations which are substantially funded by the government. The provisions for job reservation apply not only to the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes but also to the other backward classes. Over the years there has been an extension of job reservations for the benefit of the other backward classes. This has now become the most contentious issue, whether the wholesale
extension of job reservations for the other backward classes accords with the spirit of
the Constitution or not. For job reservations, unlike political reservations, the provisions
are not mandatory; they are enabling provisions. The Constitution says that the state
may take such measures as are necessary for the special benefit of the other
backward classes.

Finally, there are what may be called reservations in education. These, again,
are matters of contention, for reservation exists not only in general arts and science
courses but also in medical and engineering schools. Those who are familiar with the
subject will perhaps know that in the United States two of the most contentious legal
cases have been over reservation; first, in law school in the case of Marco De Funis,
and then in medical school in the case of Alan Bakke. In India, reservation in law
schools somehow has not been a subject of such bitter contention. But reservation in
medical and engineering schools is very controversial. Once again, when assessing
the merits of this, one must ask whether provisions that are justified for the scheduled
castes and scheduled tribes on a limited scale should be extended on such a large
scale. What is the problem with extending these reservations on such a very large
scale? The logic of reservations or of positive discrimination is that special
opportunities should be created for some over and above the general provisions for
equality of opportunity for all. Now, if you create special opportunities for some, then it
does eat into the provision of equal opportunities for all.

The question is one of balance and, once again, this question came up at the
time of the making of the Constitution of India. And the man who piloted it through the
constituent assembly was himself from an untouchable caste: Dr. Ambedkar, a
formidable lawyer. In putting these proposals forward to the constituent assembly,
Ambedkar argued that there are several conflicting aims which have to be reconciled.
First, there is the aim of providing equal opportunity for all, irrespective of caste, creed
and community. That is very important. The second aim is to create special
opportunities for those sections of society which have been severely deprived and
disadvantaged. But he went on to add that these special opportunities should not be so
extensive as to ‘eat up’ the general provision of equality of opportunity for all. Those
were the words he used. And now many people feel that the extension of reservations
to the other backward classes on such a large scale has carried the policy of
reservations so far that in many ways it threatens the more general principle of equality
of opportunity irrespective of caste, creed and community which is also inscribed into
the Constitution of India. So, very broadly speaking, this is the framework within which
the problem of positive discrimination or affirmative action in India has to be assessed.
Debate

Question - I would like to hear a little bit more about the middle part of your topic, which is inequality.

André Béteille - Inequality is a very important topic in itself and again, there are two aspects. One relates to inequalities in the agrarian social structure, that is, the problem of inequalities in the ownership, control and use of land. These inequalities continue but not in the extreme form in which they existed at the time of independence. At that time a number of measures were adopted and some of them were in fact successful. For instance, the abolition of the zamindari or the system of estates was generally successful although there were numerous evasions of the law relating to the resumption of estates by the Government. Today, you no longer find landlords owning five, ten or 15 villages as was fairly common until the 1950’s. Then the regulation of tenancy. I think that has also had some positive effects, although it had negative effects as well. Its unintended consequences should not be lost to sight. For instance, you have a relationship between landowner and tenant, and the Government comes in and changes the terms of the tenancy in favour of the tenant. What does the landlord do? The landlord evicts the tenant and transforms him into a landless labourer, tells him that if he wants to work on the land he has to renounce his claim as a tenant and work as a wage labourer. That has happened, but on the whole I think that over the last 50 years, the conditions of tenancy have become less unequal and less oppressive than they were in the past. The biggest problem, which was not fully anticipated, was the increase of population. I remember a conversation with K. N. Raj, one of our leading economists, whose heart was very much in the land reforms and who was also instrumental in drafting parts of the first five-year plan. I asked him then what he thought went wrong. He said: “You know if I were to answer that question in one single sentence I would say that we did not anticipate this tremendous increase in population.” Many of the gains of agrarian reform were swallowed up by the massive increase in population, so that the conditions of landless agricultural labourers continue to be very weak and very precarious. Some changes have come about but those changes, I would say, have led to a lowering of the top rather than a raising of the bottom. There are also provisions for the regulation of wages which have had some effect on the conditions of agricultural labourers.

There is another aspect of inequality which relates to affirmative action, and that is the creation of a new middle class in India. I think that is extremely important. It is not as if people rank each other only in terms of caste. Occupation, education and income have become increasingly important in Indian society. Now it is true that the different castes are not equally represented through the entire hierarchy of occupations. The upper castes are more common in the superior non-manual occupations. There is an over-representation of the upper castes in such occupations. And there is an overwhelming over-representation of the lower castes in the inferior, menial and manual occupations. But some shaking up has certainly been taking place and I would say that affirmative action has played a part in this. However, it is
Debate

extremely difficult to say that this would not have happened at all without affirmative action. This is very difficult to judge. Some of it I think would have happened even without affirmative action, but I feel that affirmative action has made a positive contribution. It has helped create a middle class among the untouchables and the tribals, and certainly among the other backward classes. So these are the two aspects of inequality. The increasing differentiation and ranking of people not in terms of caste but in terms of income, occupation and education of the kind that you find in societies which have had a large middle class over a much longer period of time. Although a middle class began to emerge in the presidency capitals of India like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras by the end of the nineteenth century, it has grown enormously in size in recent decades, and with this growth, a new kind of inequality has emerged.

Q - In India the utilization rate of job reservation by Dalits is very low, hardly 5 to 6 per cent of the total. I would like to know whether you have definite figures on that. My second question is in connection with your answer just now. Would you say that the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India today is connected to the size of the middle classes and their fear of being threatened by these positive measures for the other backward classes?

AB - Your first question is an extremely important one, but it is very difficult to give a clear-cut answer because it is true that at the highest levels the Dalits are under-represented, but this is changing very rapidly. You see, one of the problems is counting the number of Dalits in the educational sector. Do you include for instance, faculty appointments in universities? If you do that, then you will find that they are very poorly represented. There has been a long controversy over universities, which are autonomous institutions, and whether they are obliged to have quotas in faculty positions. Some universities have had them, others have not had them, and now they are under pressure to have reservations in faculty positions, and one doesn’t know what the outcome will be. But if you take one particular sector of the occupational system, and a very crucial one, that is the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), which is the élite corps, these provisions have been there since the beginning of the Constitution and if you go back to the 1950’s you will find one or two Dalits being recruited to the IAS. As far as I know in the last ten years quotas have been filled for recruitment to the top level of the civil service, which of course does not mean that throughout the entire range of the IAS you will find Dalit officers in proportion to their strength in the population. You will find them more proportionately represented in the younger age cohort than in the senior age cohort, but there are already secretaries to the Government of India who are Dalits.

Your second question. Well, the middle class always looks after itself in every society. I don’t think that opposition to reservation for the other backward classes was associated specifically or singularly with the BJP rather than with the Congress party. I don’t think so. I think these are other and deeper causes for the rise of the BJP. I am the kind of sociologist who is uncomfortable with the view that the rise and fall of political parties necessarily reflects basic trends in society. It may do so, over a long period of time, but fluctuations in the electoral fortunes of political parties are linked to transformations in the basic structure of society through mediations which are very complex and little understood. So I am a bit puzzled by the newspaper view that the middle classes are expanding and the BJP is looking after their interests. It is interesting that side by side with the rise of the BJP, the middle class among the Dalits has become more articulate and much more vocal and Dalit leaders are now saying that it is essential to create a Dalit middle class.
Q - You referred to affirmative action in relation to the backward classes: the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and the other backward classes. You also referred to hierarchies in sex among those classes and to the experience of affirmative action in the United States which has been most strongly related to measures introduced on the basis of sex. Can you please tell us about Indian experience in relation to affirmative action based on sex?

AB - In the last four or five years the Indian Parliament has had before it a bill on the reservation for women of 33 per cent of the total number of Parliamentary seats. Of the many commissions that have been set up in independent India and that have produced reports, I would single out the commission that was set up, I think sometime in the late 1960’s, on the status of women in Indian society and which produced a most judicious and thoughtful report. The report argued against quotas for women, either in employment or in Parliament. But that has now been reversed, with consequences which one must try to understand. There has been opposition to the reservation of seats for women in Parliament and, without taking sides on the merits or demerits of this, I think that one must examine the arguments that have been put forward. The arguments against reserving Parliamentary seats for women have been put forward mainly by leaders of the other backward classes. Their argument has been that over the years they have struggled to establish a place for themselves in politics. Through their efforts at mobilization and organization, they have captured a large number of seats in Parliament. Now one-third of those are going to be taken away and reserved for women. Who are the women who will get these seats? Their argument is that these seats will be cornered by women belonging to the upper castes and the middle classes; they agree to reservation for women, but they want quotas within the quotas and there is a problem there. The problem is that once you have quotas within quotas in Parliament, you will have to have quotas, not only for backward caste women, but also for minority women. If you have quotas for minority women, then you cannot deny quotas to Muslim women, and that will reintroduce into the Constitution the very thing against which the nationalist movement and the Constitution of India stood, that is, reservations on the basis of religion.

Thus, there are various problems with reservations for women. However, if you look – and I have often been struck by this – at the position of women in Indian society over the last 100 years, you will find, at least on the surface, that there have been great advances. For instance, the ICS, the Indian Civil Service under the British, did not recruit women. It was closed to women. When the country became independent, the IAS was thrown open to women. At first there were very few. They were recruited in ones and twos, then the figure gradually increased to ten, 12, even 15 per cent of the total intake, and it has stuck there. My assessment is that it will not rise much higher than that, so you have the civil service, the higher civil service, you have the professions, law, medicine, entertainment, the media.

I have two daughters. One is in a television company and other is in ICICI which is one of the major financial institutions in the country. Very recently, the widely-read magazine Business Today had a special issue on successful companies, and it singled out ICICI, saying that it has been very successful because it is an easy place for women to work in. Nowadays you see women, all across the board, in the various professions and in the universities. I would say that there has been a sea change in the position of women, but this is confined largely to the higher levels of society. You will not see it to nearly the same extent as you go down the hierarchy. It has been quite easy to fill positions in the best academic institutions with women and they are very
Debate

well-represented there. It has been much more difficult to fill those places with people from the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and even the other backward classes, and I think the reason is once again that the middle class looks after itself. Middle class parents in India have now decided that it is important to give not only their sons but also their daughters a very good quality education. There may not be absolute equality between the son and daughter, but I think that the change in the position of women in the middle and upper middle classes in Indian society is very striking. This is the reason why the leaders of the backward classes are opposed to quotas for women in Parliament. They feel that quotas for women in Parliament will be followed by demands for quotas for women in jobs and once again the benefits will go to middle-class women who are mainly from the upper castes.

Affirmative action in India does not mean the same thing as in the United States. To be very frank, affirmative action in India simply means numerical quotas. That is what it has come down to - numerical quotas. Quotas for women have been resisted, but other kinds of legislation, other kinds of benefits for women’s education have been put forward, though not with complete success. These have benefited mainly the middle classes and the upper middle classes and now there are two areas which have quotas for women. One has already been adopted and that is in the village councils, or Panchayats, which have seats for women. I think it is still too early to say how this is working. Enthusiasts say that it is working wonderfully and critics say the women are only there to put a stamp on decisions taken by their husbands. It is a very large country and a very complex situation. The question of quotas for women in Parliament is a complex and tangled issue. I am opposed to such quotas because I think the debate reflects a basic lack of sincerity in the political parties. No party will oppose quotas for women in Parliament. At most they will say, let us have quotas within quotas; at the same time, no political party will go out of its way to field women candidates in the elections. You do not need quotas in Parliament if there is goodwill. If the political parties are sincere about wanting more women in Parliament, then they should do what Mr. Tony Blair did in 1997. I must repeat that in India, and the sub-continent as a whole, family and kinship are extremely important in politics. This is true of Pakistan, it is true of Sri Lanka, and it is true of Bangladesh. Look at the records of our political leaders. Family and kinship are extremely important. The women who benefit are very likely to be women whose husbands, fathers or brothers already have important positions in Parliament, and that tends to dampen my enthusiasm for quotas for women.

Q - I would like to consider the future impact of caste discrimination or affirmative action in the light of two emerging trends. One is the process of globalization and privatization taking place in India and the second thing is that I believe the impact of caste remains as strong as ever before. It is just that it has changed its ways of expressing itself. If you look at Indian politics today, there is no ideology but they are all led by caste identities and caste agendas. The caste mindset continues. Education, mobility and exposure do not seem to have made an impact on the basic caste mindset of the Indian community even among the middle class and those who live abroad. So I am very sceptical about how Indian social groups, especially those who have been marginalized for several centuries, will find themselves in a situation where there is no mechanism of positive discrimination.

AB - There are two major questions wrapped up in your observations. First, I don’t agree with you that caste remains as strong as it was in the past. I don’t think so. Let me say why I don’t think so. There are very penetrating, detailed and exhaustive
discussions of caste from the end of the nineteenth century onwards in books which were published mainly by British civil servants, some of whom were very keen observers of Indian society. If you examine what they said about caste, you will find that for them the decisive feature of caste centered around the observance of rules of purity and pollution the rituals of purity and pollution, taking food, taking water, maintaining distance and so on. There can be no doubt whatsoever that there is a decline in the strength of the ritual rules of purity and pollution. I have no doubt in my mind about that. I would challenge you to show me any single detailed, ethnographic account which shows that these ritual rules have become stronger rather than weaker. But I agree that the politicization of caste is extremely important. I am not discounting that. But a kind of optical illusion is created by media interest in the politicization of caste. The media, whether television or newspapers, overplay politics not just in India, but everywhere. Newspapers are not interested in discussing the way in which ritual attitudes towards purity and pollution are breaking down. Newspapers and television channels are much more interested in recording how loyalties of caste are mobilized in the political process. I do not deny that this is happening. Certainly it has been happening over the last 50 years, but again with ups and downs, and with enormous regional variations which should not be ignored.

I see these changes as part of a long-term trend. The regulation of marriage according to rules of caste has not disappeared but it has certainly weakened substantially, and I could discuss this with you in some detail. The noted anthropologist, Louis Dumont argued that the really decisive rule for the regulation of marriage in caste society was not endogamy, but hypergamy, that is the rule according to which a man of superior caste takes wives from inferior castes. Bride givers are inferior, bride takers are superior. In a sense that brings out the hierarchical basis of caste. Today the rules of hypergamy have not only broken down, but young men and women whose ancestors used to practice hypergamy do not even know the terms that were used for these kinds of marriage. I am not saying that inter-caste marriages have become very common. They have not become very common. But they have become less uncommon than in the past. Not only that, among the middle classes, although most marriages are within the caste, it is much easier to violate the rules which required a man to marry not only within his own caste but also within the subcaste of his own caste and the sub-subcaste of his own sub-caste. So, in a long term perspective, I think these changes are quite important.

The association between caste and occupation has not disappeared. It certainly exists as I myself pointed out but it has become weaker than it was in the past. These changes are not to be discounted. I agree that caste consciousness has increased enormously and affirmative action has played a part in that by increasing and intensifying caste consciousness. But, affirmative action alone cannot be responsible. Political leaders have found caste a very easy basis for mobilizing political support. That is the easiest and the laziest course of action for a politician to take. Many years ago when I was studying this problem in the 1960's, I gave a talk to a group of American engineers. They had come to Delhi for a year's stay and the American embassy had organized a series of lectures on Indian society, a crash course of one week. My lecture was on caste and politics, and at the end of it, one man who knew nothing of the social sciences came to me and said: "What's so new about all this? In New York where I come from, we say that the politics of the city is governed by the three l's, the Italians, the Irish and the Jews." Now this analogy can be misleading but politics certainly played a very important part in intensifying caste identities in India as well as ethnic identities in America. But again, it has had its ups and downs and one
must not ignore regional variations. Compare West Bengal with Bihar, for instance. A
well-known historian used to say to me: “In Bihar only the mosquito is free from
sentiments of caste: it bites everyone irrespective of caste. Everything else is governed
by caste.” Now if you look at West Bengal, the language of politics is very different
there. So without discounting the strong presence of caste in the political system, one
must take other factors into account as well.

I go back again and again to what Dr. Ambedkar said. In Madras presidency in
the 1920’s there were reservations or quotas not only for the backwards but also for the
forwards, so all appointments were made on the basis of quotas and they had a roster
system. There was a comprehensive system of quotas, but it was manageable
because the number of positions was relatively small, and it was also feasible because
the British were not impeded by a Constitution which under Article 16 guarantees
equality of opportunity and under Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of
caste, creed and so on. We are hampered by such a Constitution. I do not think it
would be right to jettison the provision of equality of opportunity for all, irrespective of
caste. So the question is how to balance the two. In the early years of independence, in
the 1950’s and 1960’s, the Government took over the economy, became the main
employer, and acted as a pace setter all across the board. People have now begun to
feel that the Government has actually hamstrung the economy and the market should
be given more room.

Many now feel that government action is not enough for social transformation
and they have begun to turn to non-government organizations (NGOs). I have mixed
views on this. I think that the role of the Government in finding employment for all
cannot be sustained. I am not saying therefore that there should be no planning, but
that people have come to realize that expecting the Government to solve every kind
of problem that arises in society or in the economy has now become counter-productive. I
have a friend who is a great enthusiast for the private sector, and he tries to convince
me that the market solves problems by expanding opportunities and increasing
mobility. But as a sociologist I believe that when the system opens up, there will be
both upward mobility and downward mobility and, even if the net balance of mobility is
up rather than down, there will be political discontent. In a democracy, the political
costs of downward mobility are far higher than the political benefits of upward mobility,
even when upward mobility is greater than downward. After all, if I move up, I attribute
my success to myself. I don’t say that the Government has done wonderful things for
me, but when people move downwards they blame the Government. One has to be
very careful about this, and I would say that opening up to globalization will have its
costs although one should not count only the costs.

Q - I have a question on reservation in education. In a country where the
development of education is very uneven, you have written that university education
has been developed at the expense of secondary education and secondary at the
expense of primary education and it is also very uneven state-wise. So I would like to
know whether you can expand on the outcome of development in basic education and
move towards reservation at the university level.

AB - I entirely agree with you. I have myself used that very expression, that in
India, secondary education has been developed at the expense of primary education,
and college education at the expense of secondary education. But the situation is no
longer as rosy for the universities. Things are changing somewhat, but not all that
much. I think there is enormous scope for investing in education, primary education,
and I make a distinction between what I call universality and equality. I put more emphasis on universality, that is making certain basic skills, aptitudes and capabilities available to all universally, irrespective of merit and irrespective of need. They should be made universally available to all. If you wish to pursue this further, I am just in the process of publishing a book called *Equality and Universality* in which I discuss these very things.

It is important to understand how and why this lopsided development took place. It is much easier and less costly to build 25 moderately good universities than to build so many hundred thousand moderately bad schools. It is very expensive to have no more than barely adequate schools in every village. It requires enormous resources and the policy makers did not have the stamina to pursue this. The middle class did not depend on the state for primary education. The most ardent promoters of equality and social justice in India would never dream of sending their own sons and daughters to government schools. They know how to look after their children and they are prepared to pay for schooling. What they seek to do is to ensure that college education is virtually free, because their sons and daughters, having had excellent school education, will walk into the best colleges and the best legal and medical schools. This is changing, but it takes time, effort and political will to change it. And in a democracy it is extremely difficult to adopt policies which seriously hurt the interests of the middle class. You can do it in a totalitarian system. Chairman Mao could do something that Mr. Nehru could never possibly have got away with. I am a great admirer of Mr. Nehru, not an admirer of Chairman Mao, but I think one must understand that there are certain limits to what the political leadership can do in a democracy. If it does not carry the middle class with it, its political fortunes decline. I do not think that any section of the political leadership has the energy to alienate the middle class in India. Yes, it will also carry the backward castes along with it, but all that means is that it will carry the middle classes among the backward castes with it. No political leadership, no political party can afford to alienate or antagonize the middle classes. And the egalitarians, the professed promoters of equality and social justice, some of whom are my best friends, they all look after the interests of their progeny and their relatives extremely well, and after all why not?

Q - I had the pleasure recently to work for some weeks in India and one of the hottest issues in the media besides cricket and Pakistan was the revision of the history curriculum in school. Now, apparently there are a few strong leaders in society who would like to introduce some kind of Hindu history curriculum instead of the existing secular one. How do you assess the situation? Is this a move towards turning the clock back? How large do you think is the risk that these forces may succeed, may gain strength?

AB - I am very worried by this trend, let me say this straight away. I am very worried by it, and I have written in the media against it, as many sensible people have done, but the actual story is rather more complex than the professed champions of secularism make it out to be. As far as the history curriculum is concerned, the professed champions of secularism pursued somewhat ruthlessly a policy of officially sponsored Marxism in the writing of history text books and they alienated the Hindu fundamentalists and many others as well. I am not saying that this justifies doing what the proponents of *Hindutva* want to do now. Two wrongs do not make a right, and this wrong I think is far more severe than the earlier one. At least the Marxist historians included many people of intelligence and ability. The historians who are trying to promote *Hindutva* do not have the same intelligence or ability. But India is a very large
country, and the school curriculum is a state subject, not a union subject. West Bengal will never go in for this kind of thing. This trend is so absurd and fatuous that I do not see how it can go much further. I think that the very people who want to turn the clock back — it’s not just history, they will attack sociology and political science very soon — are interested in a different kind of education for their own sons and daughters. That is a very important point that should be kept in mind. This demand will cause a lot of confusion, a lot of waste, and therefore I am alarmed. When BJP came to power for the first time, I wrote an article in a newspaper in which I said that all this noise about the BJP being radically different from the other parties did not carry much conviction. My feeling was that its foreign policy would basically be the same as the foreign policy of the Congress party, and its economic policy too would not be very different from the economic policy of its predecessors. I said that what it would attack was the educational system, and particularly school education. I do worry very much about that. I think it is very worrying.

Q - I have two questions. Firstly on the issue of extending reservations, particularly in the employment sector. I'm aware that a number of Dalit groups have been lobbying for some time for the extension of reservations to the private sector also and I believe that at least one state Government is presently considering the issue seriously. I believe it is looking at the feasibility of employment reservations in the private sector, and I would like to hear your views on the feasibility and indeed the desirability of such an extension. My second question relates to the very lively national debate that took place at the time of the world conference against racism and racial discrimination and xenophobic related violence. This was quite a complex discussion that continued over a long period of time before and during the conference, and I believe that you spoke against including caste in the agenda of the world conference. I wonder if you would be prepared to elaborate on your reasoning.

AB - On the first question, the extension of reservation to the private sector, I don’t really know how far this will work out. We have very strong constitutional provisions for protecting property rights, the rights of the individual, and so on, and I don’t know how far this can be carried through. I think that it will meet very strong opposition in the private sector. Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that there must be an active policy of affirmative action as against straightforward numerical quotas applied across the board without discrimination, for every kind of institution and every kind of position, and I hope that the attack on quotas and the extension of quotas will not throw the baby of affirmative action, even aggressive affirmative action, out with the bathwater. I hope so, but I don’t really know. There is now growing hostility to affirmative action as such. I have never been opposed to affirmative action. Let me tell you how I have applied it myself, in a very small way, as a university professor, as a member of academic selection committees. In selecting students, my policy has been, other things being equal, to select a Dalit in preference to a non-Dalit. Other things being a little less than equal, still select the Dalit. But one must ensure that the person selected can deliver the goods. Official practice has been to equate affirmative action with affirmative reservation in numerical quotas and to fill the quotas without considering whether other things are equal, a little less than equal, or completely unequal. That has been an unhealthy practice, and it has damaged the prospect of affirmative action of the right kind.

On the question of race and caste, I strongly opposed the inclusion of untouchability on the agenda of racial discrimination for the simple reason that I do not believe that untouchability is a form of racial discrimination. It is a form of
discrimination, and it may be worse than racial discrimination, but one must not put it into an agenda on racial discrimination. That would be to act in bad faith and under false pretences. I think that those who were doing it knew perfectly well that caste is not a form of race but they felt that in a good cause it does not matter if you stretch a point a little. I have no objection to the atrocious practice of untouchability being discussed here in Geneva or in Buenos Aires or anywhere. I have myself discussed the practice of untouchability and the violation of the rights of untouchables in papers published both within and outside India, but I think it is wrong to include it in a conference on racial discrimination. I sincerely believe that caste is not a form of race and the overwhelming weight of professional opinion on the subject would agree. Race is a different thing from caste and therefore, if you want to discuss caste or discrimination on the basis of caste, or the practice of untouchability, do so by all means and don’t confine the discussion to Delhi or Bombay or Bangalore. Do it anyway, wherever you want to. But don’t do it under false pretences. It has various other kinds of political implication. Once you say that because these groups are more or less endogamous therefore they are races, there is nothing to prevent religious minorities from claiming that they are victims of racial discrimination. There is nothing to prevent the Catholics in Northern Ireland from claiming that they too are victims of racial discrimination. What is the difference? There is nothing to prevent the French Canadians in Canada from claiming that they are victims of racial discrimination. It cannot stop at caste. It has to cover the entire spectrum and I think it makes nonsense of our conception of race. I’ll put before you an observation which I have quoted from a very distinguished British biometrician and geneticist, J.B.S. Haldane. Haldane wrote a short piece in which he said that the term “race” has so many different meanings as to be virtually useless in scientific discussion, though it is very useful in getting members of the same nation to hate one another. Using any argument to keep the temperature up is something to which I cannot consent.

Q - I have seen a lot of frustrations among the upper castes about this question of affirmative actions or quotas. Do you feel that it might become a reason for more social divisions in India?

AB - You know, it can. There is a certain amount of frustration although I don’t have all that much sympathy for the upper castes and their complaints. My main worry is that there are so many different groups. The logic of reservation or of numerical quotas undercuts the very basis of the functioning of a whole range of modern institutions. I find it very difficult to think of a university department functioning successfully if the general impression is accepted, that Dalit students will not be taken care of unless there is a Dalit professor. Only a Dalit professor will take care of Dalit students properly. Tribal students will not be taken care of properly unless there is a tribal professor, and so on. In some states in India, where quotas have been in operation for some time, faculty positions are earmarked not only for specific subjects but also for specific castes or groups of castes. This creates an atmosphere of distrust which makes it extremely difficult for universities, hospitals and other modern institutions to function properly. Such an institution can carry quotas up to a certain point, but when they invade the entire structure of the institution, it becomes extremely difficult for it to function effectively. So quite apart from the grievances of the upper caste students, there are other reasons why comprehensive quotas are likely to create problems.

Geneva, February 2001