Assessing the Need for Reservations - Maratha Case

What is the issue?

- The Bombay High Court (HC) recently upheld the Maharashtra government's law on reservation for Marathas. Click here to know more.
- This makes a case for assessing the real rationale behind reservations and reflecting upon the idea of backwardness.

What is the present case?

- The demand for being classified as "backward" by Marathas has been ongoing since the 1990s.
- The Marathas are now included into the Socially and Educationally Backward Communities (SEBC).
- With this, the Maharashtra government has once again yielded to the demands of this powerful caste group.
- This would be the third attempt in the last 5 years to grant this quota, which has been repeatedly struck down by the courts.

What do the quota demands imply?

- Some of the mostly rich, landowning, politically influential communities have been demanding quotas in jobs and higher education.
- E.g. Marathas in Maharashtra, Patidars in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, Kapus in Andhra Pradesh
- In a way, this indicates that the economic growth in the last two decades did not contribute much to the fortunes of a large proportion of these communities.
- It is also an indication that their traditional sources of livelihoods had become more fragile due to a widespread and multifaceted agrarian crisis.
- Given these, the desire for good jobs and stable sources of livelihood gives way for the increasing quota demands.
- However, public sector jobs have become much more competitive given the limited numbers.
- So, there should be a rational criteria to determine the validity of the demand for quotas.

Is the "backward" argument justifiable?

- Marathas, similar to Jats and Patels, are more likely to own or cultivate land than all other social groups in their respective States.
- Marathas have a lower per capita consumption expenditure than Maharashtra Brahmins.
- But, it stands at the same level as other forward castes and OBCs, and significantly higher than SC/STs.
- Marathas, on an average, are as 'poor' as Brahmins and other forward castes, but less poor than OBCs and SC-STs.
- In terms of access to electricity, access to a flush toilet, average years of education, Marathas are better off than the OBCs and SC-STs.
- So, in most of the crucial socio-economic indicators, the Marathas are second only to Brahmins in the State, and are significantly better off than all other social groups.
- The main bone of contention and the main motivation for quotas now is access to government jobs.
- However, the access of Marathas to government jobs is already similar to that of Brahmins, and higher than that for other forward castes, OBCs, and SC-STs.

What contributes to the Maratha unrest then?

- There is some evidence of a decline in the probability of owning or cultivating land, which could be the reason for the heightened anxiety.
- The Marathas are a predominantly agricultural community that benefited from the Green and White Revolutions.
- But, these groups are increasingly feeling vulnerable due to the structural transformation of the Indian economy caused by -
    i. the declining importance of agriculture
    ii. growth of corporatised agriculture
    iii. water shortages affecting productivity
- Overall, there is discontent among powerful farming communities.
- This is due to the perception that real economic power lies in the hands of the big corporations, and the state, directly or indirectly, acts in their interest.
- In all, the deteriorating power and the unpreparedness to shift towards urban, formal sector livelihood opportunities make these communities feel vulnerable.
- The IHDS (India Human Development Survey) also shows that forward castes were about 30% more likely to feel that they were worse off in 2011-12 than in 2004-05.
- This sense of deprivation fuels the quota demand.

What is the way forward?

- The economic changes that give rise to widespread anxieties definitely need to be understood.
- Genuine grievances, including those that might come from forward castes dealing with agrarian transformations, need to be addressed.
- However, it is highly debatable if reservation should be the answer for this.
- Given increasing privatisation, the base, i.e. total jobs that are eligible for reservations, is already shrinking.
- Moreover, the existing OBCs and SC-STs are further lagging behind upper castes on a range of material indicators.
- In this context, extending quotas to relatively richer and powerful groups would dilute the very ideal of socio-educational justice behind reservations.

Source: The Hindu

