Research Paper Education

Caste Reservation in Education: A Study of the NCR

Yuvraj Khetan | 421-A Hamilton Court, DLF Phase 4 Gurgaon, Haryana 122009

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the effect of the reservation policy in higher education. The focus of this paper is on Delhi NCR and the data has been collected in the form of online surveys. The survey has three sections – background information, the main survey and a true or false section. All of these sections play a part in understanding the final results. This paper attempts to answer the question 'Is the reservation policy leading to social inclusion and integration amongst college students in the NCR?' The results of the survey indicate that although there is a hint of resentment in the non-category students, overall, they are more accepting towards the SC/ST/OBC students. The category students still do not feel integrated well enough but that can be achieved by creating awareness and providing adequate support.

KEYWORDS Reservation, Education, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, College

Introduction

A total of 49.5% of seats in the Delhi University (DU) are reserved for Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/Other Backward Classes (SC/ST/OBC) students. This is no small amount and it is no surprise then that caste reservation in education has become a major issue amongst the youth. Many people have strong opinions about reservation in India and especially in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). These people include students who are directly involved in the matter. How the students act as a result of their experience with the reservation policy is extremely important. This study will take a look at what the opinion of college going students in the NCR is on issues like social inclusion and integration of the SC/ST/OBC students and will answer the question 'Is the reservation policy leading to social inclusion and integration amongst college students in the NCR?'

This paper is focused on the NCR which is an urban environment. An urbanised area was chosen so that generalisation could be made about the reservation system. The students of Delhi University provide an ideal sample for this survey. It would have been very difficult to get a nationwide response and so the survey was limited to the NCR. Moreover, the NCR has received a great deal of attention on this topic. This paper does not intend to suggest changes to the reservation policy itself; instead, it looks to assess the impact of the reservation policy on student life. It specifically focuses on the impact on SC/ST/OBC students and the image the policy creates for them.

The paper begins with a literature review that looks at previous efforts to examine the effects of the reservation policy and puts this paper in context. The methodology used for the survey is then discussed followed by basic information about the respondents. Next are the main survey findings that talk about the result of the survey and in the end is the conclusion that synthesises the information gathered and provides some insight stemming from this information.

Literature Review

A great amount of research has been done on the impact of the reservation policy. A lot of the research has assessed the economic cost of reservation on government (Chalam, 1990). Some research has also focused on the impact of the reservation policy on SC/ST/OBC students in terms of dropout rate, academic performance, job preference etc. (Verma, 2013). There are scholars who support reservation and point to its achievement in promoting integration (Weisskopf, 2004) but there are also people who think that we should "Give all the assistance that society can afford to enable people who are disadvantaged or handicapped today to compete with the others…But when the competition starts, everybody is equal, and they must be able to compete with the others. Don't lower standards." (Shourie, 2006)

Methodology

The sample of students that answered this survey was random. The survey was online and assured anonymity because it did not ask for the respondent's name. The link for the survey was distributed to a few people from DU first, and then these people were told to distribute it further. Therefore, the people taking the survey could not be influenced in any way.

The questions were constructed based on the literature review and aimed to look at the impact of the reservation policy and what it is leading to. There was a pilot test of the survey to see if the questions were easily answerable. Some questions were deleted due to ambiguity or repetitiveness and some were tweaked to become clearer and easier to answer. After the pilot test, the survey was sent out. The people who were given links were told that the survey would take less than ten minutes to ensure that responses would actually be obtained. Even so, some respondents did take well over 10 minutes to complete the survey. Overall, the responses have been well thought out.

There were three sections to the survey. The first section asked for background information about the respondent. It included questions like: 'What is the highest level of education your parents completed?' and 'Which category do you belong to?' The next section was the main survey which asked the respondent to give his/her opinion on certain statements about social inclusion and integration of the SC/ST/OBC students. The respondent had five options; namely 'Strongly Disagree', 'Disagree', 'Neutral', 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree'. The third and final section was a 'True or False' section. The instructions told the respondent to state whether he/she thought the statements were true or false. In fact, all the statements in this section were true. This was done to see how much the respondents knew about the subject.

Respondents Overview

The background information section provided a lot of valuable information about the respondents. Most of the respondents were second generation students as the pie chart below shows.

Chart 1: Many of the respondents were from a family background where the parents had already attained a Bachelor's Degree.

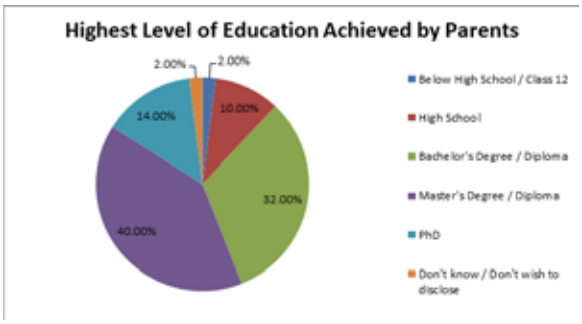


Chart 2: Almost all of the respondents had been brought up in an urban or semi urban environment and so were not likely to face the hardships of rural life.

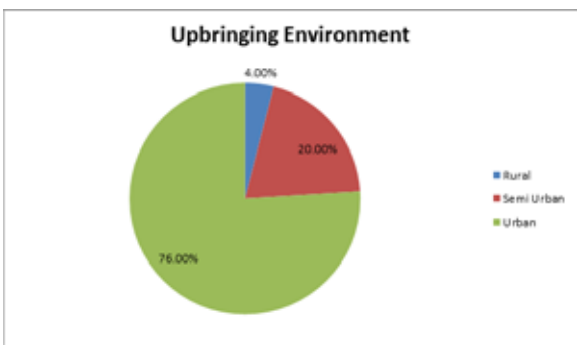
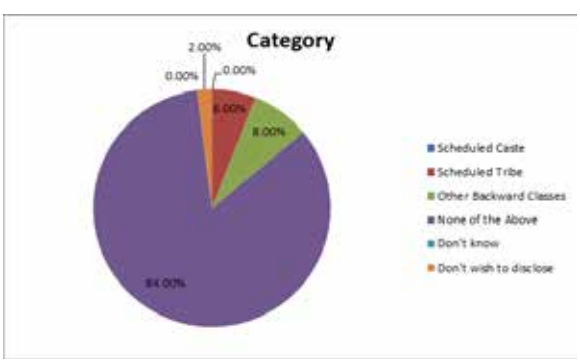


Chart 3: Most respondents were not from any category i.e. SC/ST/OBC. This could be a case of people from the categories choosing not to respond due to various reasons like apprehension about where the survey might be used.



Main Survey Findings

The results of the main survey can be split into two groups: opinion of non-category respondents on the situation of category students and the opinion of category respondents on category students i.e. perception vs. personal experience. The results will be shared through a statement wise analysis.

"It is easy for SC/ST/OBC students to get into top colleges in India."

This statement had some interesting responses as about 66% of non-category respondents agreed or strongly agreed to this statement. On the other hand, 60% of category respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This shows that people who are not form a category feel that category people have an easy way in to top colleges. They probably have this perception due to the fact that many colleges have a large amount of seats reserved for SC/ST/OBC students. However, people from the categories have the opposite experience. They feel that it is not easy at all and this is could well be true if we consider the type of difficulties they face to reach to a certain level.

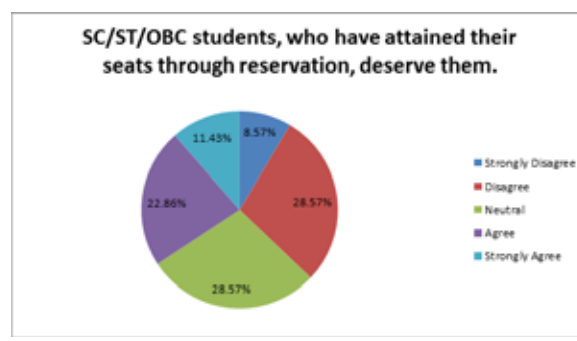
"SC/ST/OBC students get adequate support (academic and emotional) in college."

More than 50% of non-category respondents disagreed to this statement. This shows that most people feel that category students should get more support in college whether it is academic or emotional. Many times, students who get into college through reservation find themselves without any help or guidance. The fact that non-category respondents recognise this is a good sign for the future because this realisation can help decision makers organise better counselling for category students.

"SC/ST/OBC students, who have attained their seats through reservation, deserve them."

This was a very key statement amongst all the other statement and it was interesting to what the respondents had to say. The verdict of the category respondents was clear; 80% agreed with the statement. This is probably a true indicator of the opinion of the category students as they would feel like they have worked hard to get their seats and that they thoroughly deserve them. The opinion of the non-category respondents can best be represented by the chart below.

Chart 4

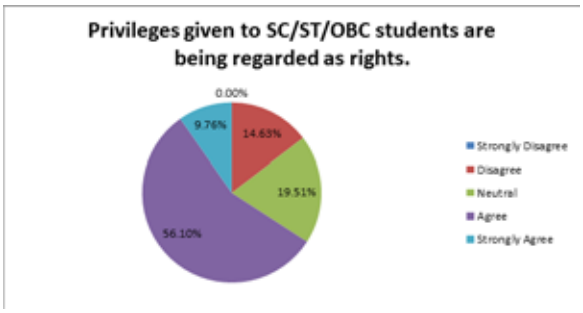


From the chart above, we can see how divided the opinion is amongst non-category respondents. It is almost evenly split between those who agree and those who disagree. This seems to suggest a feeling of resentment amongst some of the non-category respondents. They probably feel that the category students got their seats too easily and hence did not deserve them. On the other hand, there are almost an equal number of non-category respondents who agree with the statement. This statement had one of the most even splits amongst the non-category respondents.

"Privileges given to SC/ST/OBC students are being regarded as rights."

This statement received one of the strongest opinions out of all the other statements in the survey. An overwhelming 66% of non-category respondents agreed to this statement. This tells us that although they feel category students are not getting adequate support in college, they also feel that they are regarding some of their privileges as rights. What is even more fascinating is that 60% of the category respondents agree to this statement as well. Thus it can be said that both sets of people agree with this statement. The chart below shows the response of both groups as a whole and gives a good idea of the general opinion.

Chart 5



"SC/ST/OBC students are at a disadvantage even before they begin their higher education (Coaching fees, Language difficulties)."

Unsurprisingly, 80% of category respondents strongly agreed with this statement. These people are probably speaking from their experience as it is well established that students from the categories are tend to be from lower economic backgrounds thus find it difficult to obtain good quality preparation resources for entrance exams. On the other side, 57% of the non-category respondents agreed with this statement. Therefore, it is evident that non-category students also feel that category students have to face many difficulties to get in to college.

"SC/ST/OBC students are weak because they do not speak English."

Almost 50% of non-category respondents disagreed with this statement which was a surprise. This indicates that non-category students feel that SC/ST/OBC students are probably not weak in college and English is definitely not a reason for their weakness. On the flip side, 60% of category respondents strongly agree to this statement. This tells us that category students do feel the pressure of not knowing English well and this does hamper them in college.

"SC/ST/OBC students live in the periphery of institution and student life."

This was an important statement in the survey that aimed to find out whether the students from the categories were neglected or given enough support. 60% of the category respondents agreed with this statement. This tells us that these students feel like their concerns are not addressed within their community. However, almost half of the non-category respondents disagreed with this statement which shows that according to them, category students get a lot of attention. This is a mismatch between opinions and is probably one of the main reasons for there to be very little support offered to SC/ST/OBC students.

"SC/ST/OBC students are sufficiently integrated with the rest of the students - socially and culturally."

This was a very important statement in the survey that aimed to find out whether the students from the categories were well integrated with the others. Unsurprisingly, 60% of the category respondents disagreed with this statement and it is now evident that they do not feel integrated in their college. In this case however, it is interesting to note the response of the non-category respondents. Around 43% of the respondents disagreed with this statement and about 29% agreed with it. This is interesting because earlier, the non-category respondents said that SC/ST/OBC students did not live in the periphery of student life but now, they are also saying that these students are not sufficiently integrated with the student body. This seems to suggest that non-category students are aware that category students are not getting adequate support.

"Reservation is creating mediocrity."

60% of category respondents strongly disagreed to this statement which reflects their attitude towards reservation. They feel that it creates a level playing field and can help everyone get an equal opportunity. The non-category respondents gave mixed opinions. Around 30% disagreed with this statement but that the same time around 37% agreed with it. It is also worth noting that out of the 30% who disagreed, none strongly disagreed whereas out of the 37% who agreed, more than a third strongly agreed. Therefore, we are left with a situation in which some non-category students do feel that it is a valid advantage to the category students but more feel that it is completely unfair and is promoting mediocre performance.

Conclusion

This survey definitely captured more of the perception the non-category students have of the situation of the category students and the reservation policy in general. Overall, there does not seem to be any bitterness between the two groups and the non-category group shows an openness to accept the reservation. It is also clear that this issue is not a burning issue in the students' lives at the moment since a significant number of statements had a considerably large percentage of 'Neutral' responses. One reason for the openness and acceptance could be the fact that this survey was conducted in the NCR which has become, over the past few years, a melting pot of sorts. People from many parts of the country come to Delhi looking for a quality education. This in turn has made 'Delhi-ites' used to the diversity they find in their city. Although the tolerance is commendable, it is also worth noting that some statements did bring out some resentment among both groups. Therefore, these issues need to be sorted through better awareness and social inclusion exercises. It is also worth noting that Delhi-NCR is a microcosm of urban India. Hence we can draw generalisations from our findings and apply them to other metros like Mumbai and Bangalore.

Although this survey has shown that there is only some resentment between the two groups, the government needs to think deeply about a few issues surrounding the policy. First, the reservation policy has been in use for a long time now and it is worth thinking about whether it has achieved the desired effect. If not, then how long does the government plan to continue using this policy? There should be a time limit after which the government decides that the advantages that were needed to be given have been given and that it is time to stop the reservation. Keeping in mind the fact that positive discrimination for one person also means negative discrimination for the other. Second, the cost to the government to continually implement the policy is immense. A cost to the government eventually means a cost to taxpayers and more tax revenue is generated from the general category of the population. This means that a family that is not part of any category, is paying tax to reduce the chances of their children to get into a good university.

All in all, the government has a lot of things to look at and must take important decisions sooner rather than later so that the current situation regarding caste reservation in education can be improved.