

Asking Questions of ‘OBC’ as a category

Asha Singh and Nidhin Donald

Abstract: *This paper aims to understand the journey of Other Backward Class (OBC) as a governmental category to underline some of its limitations and possibilities. Such an exercise is in no way exhaustive, building on what has already been achieved, this paper attempts to provide further clarifications on the history of ‘identifying and enlisting’ backward classes, pointing out underlying sociological assumptions and contradictions. The aim would be to flesh out some of the fundamentals which inform the term ‘backward’ and its growth. In the second part of the paper, the first author (Asha Singh) would reflect on how one could begin to understand the relationship between OBC women and the category, drawing insights primarily (but not exclusively) from the Bhojpuri region. Such reflections fully understand that there is no ready-made community called ‘OBC women’; rather we only have women as a part of castes/tribes listed as OBC, often without any real consequence of it in their lives.*



Asha Singh: communication.asha@gmail.com; Nidhin Donald: shobhana.nidhin@gmail.com

Forward Man’s Burden: The making and marking of the ‘backward’

The first half of the 20th century was a time of great fluctuation in the Indian subcontinent. Mainstream historiography has sanitized this flux by focusing solely on ‘nationalist’ struggles against British Imperialism. A closer reading would expose a much more complicated picture. This period was marked by multiple struggles waged by ‘lower-caste’ groups to enter the emerging public sphere. G. Aloysius observes that such struggles were diverse, fragmented and waged in different places. Nonetheless, he identifies certain common strands in them. One, the struggles recognized the need to break away from the ‘relegated’ status (diverse groups were brought under a monolithic social imagination, where they were clearly assigned *Shudra* and *Ati-Shudra* status) imposed upon lower-castes through what he calls, ‘collusive colonialism.’¹ Two, they also realized

1 G. Aloysius, in his work ‘The Brahminical Inscribed in Body-Politic’ (op.cit.) conceptualizes the first hundred years of British Colonialism as ‘Collusive Colonialism’. The British Colonizer actively collaborated with the socially-dominant groups of the Brahminical Elite in different regions to collect tax, codify land, understand the organization of the society and ensure a steady flow of revenue. As a result of this collaboration, the Brahminical Elite emerged as the ‘new middle class’ populating the ranks of institutional power and education. They developed as an intermediary, a necessary filter through which the colonial state communicated with the large masses. The process of collusive colonialism was two-fold. It ensured not just the economic dispossession of the masses but also ensured

the need to shape a ‘modern’ future by entering spaces of institutional power through employment and education. Education, he notes (and others corroborate), was a central driving force for many subaltern struggles during this period. He incisively underlines that ‘the counter-moves of the subalterns were a direct response to the process of ‘backwardization’ imposed on them.’²

The possibilities of this flux were both empowering and emancipatory. Lower castes had started talking directly to the British administration. The policy of ‘minimum interference’ (from an initial policy of no interference) adopted by the British, post-1857, opened up many services to historically subjugated groups. The army, which was initially a preserve of socially dominant groups such as Rajputs and Brahmins, was diversified to include many ‘lower-caste’ groups, specifically during the World Wars.³ There was also a shift in the education policy of the Colonial State. We find an attempt on their part to provide opportunities and open schools for lower castes. However, the assertions of ‘lower-castes’ faced a serious catch. Their attempts to push the envelope were disciplined by the national fiction of ‘Varnashrama Dharma’ and ‘Hinduism.’ G. Aloysius points out that the varna social order of the Ganges river-valley was superimposed on the subcontinent during British colonialism.⁴ Despite all of this, lower-castes negotiated with modern institutions and made progressive claims for representation and proportionate diffusion of power. The Colonial state responded positively to at least a few demands.

The ‘Non-Brahmin Manifesto’ of 1916 Madras made an evidence-based case for reasonable representation in public services of the presidency. This manifesto and allied struggles inspired the First Communal Government Order of 1921, which classified appointments in Madras under the following heads – (a) Brahmins (b) Non-Brahmins (c) Indian Christians (d) Mohammadans (e) European and Anglo Indians (6) Others. Subsequent government orders implemented this scheme of new appointments on the basis of the population of the respective heads. Thus, the 1928 order reserved 5 out of every 12 new appointments for Non-Brahmin (Hindus). Only 1 out of 12

socio-cultural deprivation of the largest sections. The latter was largely achieved through a super-imposition of a rigid Brahmanical order which may or may not have received a lot of validity prior to British arrival.

2 G. Aloysius writes in ‘Contextualizing Backward Classes Discourse in India’ (op.cit.) – ‘These acts of resistance [by the subalterns] could be in the forms of vagrancy, looting grain, engaging in criminal activities, violent retaliations, setting up caste associations, claiming higher social status, self-help efforts, tribal revolts, demand for entry into new education, government employment and representations, fleeing away from Hinduism, invention of histories, constructing alternative views of spirituality.’

3 Khan, H.N, Upliftment of OBCs: Human Rights Perspectives. Rawat Publication, 2012, p.18; It should be noted that the composition of the army varied across British India. However, it goes without saying the first half of the twentieth century witnessed new entrants from socially subjugated groups in greater numbers.

4 See Aloysius, G. *British created Hinduism and Brahmins created the myth that India is Bharat: G Aloysius*. Prabuddha: Journal of Social Equality, [S.I.], v. 2, n. 1, Nov. 2018, p. 1-16. Also Dr. Palpu, a pioneer anti-caste mobilizer and thinker of Travancore provides ample evidence of how caste and varna-based rationale were used to deny entry into schools and employment in *The Ezhava Memorial* of 1897 submitted to the Maharajah of Travancore. One finds similar accounts in the writings of Mahatma Jotiba Phule, especially his representation to the Hunter Commission in late 19th century.

appointments was reserved for 'Others' (which included Depressed Classes).⁵ One finds examples of such measures in other parts of Southern India as well. The 1918 appointment of a Committee under the leadership of Sir Leslie C. Miller, Chief Judge of the Mysore High Court, to look into the status of Backward Communities in Mysore public services and higher education is a watershed in the history of backward class movements. The precursor to such an appointment was the social mobilization of various 'non-brahmin' communities through caste associations, self-help initiatives and other interventions in the emerging public sphere of Mysore. Prior to the appointment of the Committee, Mysore State had already introduced a 'rudimentary' system of reservation in 1874, wherein 8 out of every 10 posts were reserved for Non-Brahmins, Muslims and Indian Christians. However, it was not implemented as the services were dominated by Brahmins and they clearly resisted the move at multiple levels of implementation. Reservations for Non-Brahmins were usually made in the lower rungs of the government services. Along with measures to diffuse power among communities and castes, the Mysore State also implemented progressive measures to improve the educational attainments of Non-Brahmins. For example, Rupees One lakh was sanctioned as a grant for Non-Brahmins in 1916, notwithstanding the bitter resistance from the Brahmins. The government also accepted the educational memorandum proposed by Dr. C. R. Reddy which evolved special measures for the educational needs of Dalits and Backward Classes in Mysore. However, the existing systems of reservation which began in the last quarter of the 19th century were far from adequate and faced hostility and resistance from the Brahmins. Thus, in 1918, under the leadership of Dr. C. R. Reddy a delegation of prominent members of *Praja Mitra Mandali* presented a formal memorandum to the Maharaja seeking concessions to Non-Brahmins. The appointment of the Miller Committee was a response to this memorandum.⁶

The terms of reference of the Miller Committee are appealing for the purpose of this paper. The Committee was supposed to make recommendations which improve the representation and educational attainments of Non-Brahmin communities. The focus on 'education' was explained as a way to 'increase the status' of the Non-Brahmins. *Diffusion of education was perceived as a method to diffuse power* and thereby an increased sense of importance among relegated castes/communities. Though the caste composition of the Committee was not representative (it did not have any representatives from present day SC/ST or even OBC categories), it played a crucial role in conceptualizing the idea of backwardness and effective governance through wider participation and democracy. Reducing the preponderance of Brahmins in State Services was a stated agenda of the Committee. In order to ensure the participation of other castes/communities in governance, the Committee devised two criteria to identify backward classes. They were – (a) Those communities/castes with less than 5% English literacy rates (b) Those communities/castes with less than proportionate representation in government services. These criteria fulfilled the stated terms of reference of the Committee. Since Government services and English literacy are crucial in accessing institutional power within the State, lack of it was made the criteria for 'backwardness.' The Brahmin members in the Committee did produce dissent notes against the

⁵ For details, Yadav, K. C., & Singh, R. (1994). *India's Unequal Citizens: A Study of Other Backward Classes*. Manohar, Delhi.

⁶ Thimmaiah, G. *Power politics and social justice: backward castes in Karnataka*. Sage, 1993, p.56

recommendations of the Committee, which proposed a reservation of 7 out of 10 seats to Non-Brahmins. They couched their argument on ‘merit.’ They pointed out that reservations would dilute efficiency. However, the Committee stated that a presence of a diverse body of public servants would only help in boosting efficiency and competence as policies and decisions would be informed from beyond the narrow limits of a single caste or community.⁷

It should be noted that colonial attempts perceived representation largely in terms of power-diffusion and efficiency to ensure greater trust and allegiance from its subjects. Such a conceptualization was turned upside down in the Constituent Assembly of India. This was done by rejecting the principle of communal, proportionate representation (caste or religion as ‘criteria’ was an anathema to a secular nation-in-the-making) and introduction of the term ‘backward’ in a new light.⁸

Babasaheb Ambedkar, in the Constituent Assembly, observes that the word ‘backward’ was strategically invoked by the Drafting Committee to keep affirmative policy as an exceptional step - or in other words, not a rule. If safeguards are an exercise in ‘power-sharing,’ then Reservations should be provided to communities who so far had no ‘proper look-in’ into institutional power of a modern nation-state. However, Babasaheb argues that such a view would mean reserving almost 70 percent seats in favour of historically excluded groups. This would destroy the ‘generic principle’ of equality of opportunity. In other words, the exception of *safeguards* would become the rule. In order to strike a compromise, a reconciliation or to keep the largely upper-caste members of the assembly happy, it was decided that safeguards would be confined to a *minority of seats*. This could be done, only through the introduction of a qualifying phrase like

⁷ Ibid, p.60. After the Miller Committee Report, similar Committees were appointed in Bombay (O.H.B. Starte Committee) and other parts of the Colonial State to look into issues of ‘backward classes. The Hartog Committee of 1928 defined backward classes as ‘educationally backward’ depressed classes, hill tribes, aboriginals and criminal tribes. Marc Galanter (op.cit.) attempts to historically trace the meanings of ‘backward classes’ before the appointment of Backward Classes Commission in post-colonial India. He points out that the word had different meanings. The word often included depressed classes, tribes and other less advanced groups. We find groups being subtracted or added from this broad definition. Starte Commission of 1929 spent considerable time on nomenclature. The Commission recommended the use of ‘intermediate classes’ for those ‘backward communities’ which are not tribes or untouchables. Galanter also observes that there were opinions which argued for an inclusion of ‘backward castes’ within the category of depressed Classes. However, one also finds attempts such as that of United Province Hindu Backward Classes league (1929) to dissociate themselves with the word ‘depressed’. They wanted to replace it with ‘Hindu Backward’. In 1937, Galanter notes that Travancore abandoned the term ‘depressed classes’ and replaced it with the word ‘backward communities’ to include all socially and educationally backward groups. However, in Madras, the term ‘backward communities’ was specifically linked to ‘non-dominant’ Non-Brahmin communities who were asking for special measures. This group did not include untouchables. In 1947, they were recognised within appointments as Backward Hindus.

⁸ One finds the term ‘backward classes’ scantily in the Constitution. They are found in Article 15(4), 15(5), 16(4), 46 (indirectly as weaker section), 243 (D), 24 (T), 338 and finally and most importantly Article 340 which formed the basis of appointing a Commission to investigate the conditions of socially *and* educationally backward classes and make necessary recommendations It has not been defined in the Constitution. Most of the mentions were introduced through Amendments. For example, 15(4) was introduced through a constitutional amendment in 1951. Similarly, 15(5) through an amendment in 2005.

‘backward.’⁹ It should be noted that the original draft of the fundamental rights did not have this word in it. Jawaharlal Nehru in his interventions on safeguards for the minorities and Reservation policies states that he would refrain from perceiving reservation as a policy which safeguards the interest of specific castes, communities or tribes rather as a selfless gesture of a forward-looking state to help its ‘backward.’¹⁰ The same emotion or posturing is evident in the First Backward Class Commission Report where its Chairperson, Kaka Kalelkar writes¹¹ –

It would be well if representatives of the backward classes remembered that whatever good they find in the Constitution and the liberal policy of the Government is the result of the *awakened conscience of the upper classes themselves*.

We find a marked shift in the debate after independence – a swing from ‘representation,’ ‘power-sharing’ and ‘diffusion of power’ to a charitable effort of ‘helping backward groups’ on the part of awakened upper-classes. The use of the word ‘backward’ disciplines this change in at least two ways. It provides an ahistorical canvas to devise new ways of identifying the group that needs ‘help.’ Two, it protects the identities of a brahminical elite that has emerged as the de-facto helper in post-colonial India. It will not remind him of negative histories. He can fully emerge as an ‘individual’ generous enough to amend the woes of the relegated ‘communities.’ Affirmative action becomes the *forward man’s burden*. The need to discipline the caste question and the ‘awareness among the masses’ are unambiguously endorsed in the first backward classes report.¹²

Talking about the ‘safeguards’ provided by the Constitution to historically marginalized groups, G. Aloysius points out something very interesting in his thought-provoking paper ‘Contextualizing Backward Classes Discourse in India.’ He argues that the *subject* of equality and equal opportunities in the Constitution (drawn from the Objective resolutions of Mr. Nehru) is the ‘individual.’ On the other hand, the *subject* of concessional and exceptional ‘safeguards’ are collectivities, groups and categories. The former is a *rule* while the latter is *exceptional and temporary*. The life of safeguards is fully dependent on the ‘rule’. Taking this ahead, Aloysius points out, the idea of ‘equality of opportunity and treatment’ seem to refer to the interests of the

⁹ See Constituent Assembly Debates, Vol. 7, 30th November 1948. Accessed from: http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/7/1948-11-30_on_13/01/2019.

¹⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru argues that the Constituent Assembly had made a historic move by discarding the ‘evil’ called Separate electorates. He goes on to say that we have to do away with ‘reservations’ as well. He points out that ‘safeguards’ of one form or the other are alright in an ‘autocratic or foreign rule’ but not in a political democracy. Constituent Assembly Debates Vol.8, 26th May 1949. Accessed from: http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/8/1949-05-26_on_13/01/2019.

¹¹ See Kalelkar, K. *Report of the National Backward Class Commission, I. Parts I*, Government of India, New Delhi.

¹² Kaka Kalelkar writes - “The age-old resignation of the masses to their lot is gone. They no longer believe that it is Fate that has kept them backward. They are not yet alive to their own share in the backwardness viz., apathy, lethargy and negligence. They are too backward to be introspective and to find out what is wrong with themselves. Their representatives and leaders have read the literature that we evolved in finding faults with the evils of the British rule. They have come to know how one race dominates the other [...] they have heard the inevitability of class conflict. No wonder if they are prone to draw hasty conclusions”. Ibid.

'*miniscule*,' while the question of safeguards is concerned with the '*majority*'. He concludes that the liberal democratic vision inscribed within the Constitution of the nation-state can be described as follows –

The forward march of the few individuated citizens (obviously of the so-called middle classes) with the entitlements – liberty, equality, justice and non-discrimination by the state on one hand, and adequate protection from this, for the majority of the relegated groups, on the other.

Thus, the promise of formal equality is effectively a way to allow the undeterred growth of the elite which populated the Constituent Assembly. They were ensured all the fruits of European Enlightenment (re-inscribed in our Constitution) in a non-discriminatory environment. This forward march of the 'forwards' would naturally make the 'backward' more 'backward'. Thus, in order to protect them from this obvious consequence or collateral damage, certain concessions were made.

The term 'backward' can be meaningful only in a relational sense. Depending upon the benchmark set by the state, communities can be called 'backward' or 'forward'. If one narrows the standards of identifying 'backward' communities one may end up excluding many groups; on the other hand, if we broaden the standards many communities would be included in the list. Today, one would find lists of backward communities, but we would not find any lists of the advanced Other. Again, these lists are exclusive and assumed to be self-sufficient. Effectively, only groups within the list can compete with each other. Thus, *advancement and backwardness* would be determined within the group itself. As a result, one can only compare the 'Teli' in Bihar with 'Kahars' or 'Ahirs'. A comparison of Telis with Kayasthas or Brahmins would be beyond the scope of lists. This is not to argue that such comparisons are not possible. But they would be constrained by the non-availability of caste-based data and the logic of lists. The non-existence of caste-based data has been a political and academic impediment for any social programme aimed at greater representation and redistribution. Thus, we often face a situation where OBC, SC or ST lists act as the limits of competition and politics. We compete with those of whom we are listed with. Quite naturally, such a situation would delimit the claims of smaller/under-represented castes and communities within categories. Quota within quota becomes the only viable option for them within the constraints of the state and its infrastructure.

Furthermore, 'backward' was/is also used to propagate certain value judgements in official documents. For example, the Kaka Kalelkar Report provides several descriptions (if not a specific definition) of what constitutes backward classes. Kalelkar describes 'backwards' as those classes who do not possess the ability to introspect, backwards as those who live far away from civilization, with 'unwholesome customs/unclean habits and superstitions' (reflected in one of the questions in its questionnaire), backwards as those who do not spend money on their children's education or those who marry off their daughters underaged, while others (meaning the forwards) were spending their fortunes on their children and thereby building gender-parity in their communities; backwards as that non-meritorious majority which wants to burden the state with issues which they should have taken care themselves. Kaka Kalelkar places the 'forwards' or 'advanced' as the exact opposite of all these descriptions.¹³ Similar valuations can also be found

¹³ Kaka Kalelkar, 1955 (op.cit.)

against SCs and STs in the annual reports by the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In 1956-57 the Commissioner's report intuitively states that people try to keep themselves 'backward' for government concessions and benefits.¹⁴

In spite of all their efforts to circumvent caste as an indicator of backwardness,¹⁵ the Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report, primarily authored by T. Mariappa, admits their inability to do so.¹⁶ Untouchability, the sure test for Scheduled Castes, was perceived simply as a resolvable, peripheral manifestation of the caste system.¹⁷ On the other hand, the identification of caste or the structure itself as a reason for the backwardness of the majority was a threatening discovery for the Chairperson.¹⁸ This fear clearly explains his rejection of the report, soon after its submission. We would argue that this fear is an inherent potential of the category. A potential Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had clearly identified in his writings. In his essay '*Buddha and the future of his religion*' Babasaheb carves out a significant political space for 'Backward Classes' along with 'Scheduled Castes' in challenging Hinduism and the hindu social order. He argues that Hinduism would not

¹⁴ For details see, *Lokur Committee: The Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes*. New Delhi: India, Government, 1965.

¹⁵ The Kaka Kalelkar Commission Report notes in its first chapter – 'We have considered the opinion that the term of references indicated [...] do not refer to caste but to sections or classes of people who are socially and educationally backward, it is apprehended that if the basic caste system is taken into account more harm than good will be done to the nation. It has been suggested that the Commission might recommend concessions for groups of people, not associated with a caste or a sub-caste, but the common hereditary occupations or common professions.' Use of the word, *class*, aimed at washing away any direct reference to castes or sub-castes. A more sanitized term, '*hereditary occupations*', was invoked to settle the question further. The same chapter, points out that a Chamar may be given concessions not because he belongs to a caste or a sub-caste, but '*because they have been following a particular trade or calling.*'

¹⁶ The Report (op.cit.) states - '[...] We tried to avoid caste but we found it difficult to ignore caste in the present prevailing conditions. We wish it were easy to dissociate caste from social backwardness at the present juncture. In modern time anybody can take to any profession. The Brahman, taking to tailoring, does not become a tailor by caste, nor is his social status lowered as a Brahman.'

¹⁷ In the case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, definitions did not come easily, nor did they go unchallenged. In 1965, Lokur Commission was appointed to revise the lists of SCs and STs. The Commission briefly discussed the trajectory of definitions. The Commission was of the opinion that 'untouchability' alone cannot be the criteria for Scheduled Castes. However, it could not come up with an alternative comprehensive definition. Groups (tribes, castes, sub-castes or race) facing extreme social, economic and educational 'backwardness' as a result of untouchability can be classified as 'Scheduled Castes'. Similarly, in the case of Scheduled tribes' tests were devised on the basis of 'primitiveness' and 'backwardness'. Backwardness as a concept is a constant in all deliberations of 'safeguards' for the masses.

¹⁸ The four major indicators of the First Backward Classes Commission Report were as follows: (a) *Low social position* in the traditional caste hierarchy of Hindu Society (b) *Lack of general educational advancement* among the major sections of a caste or community. (c) *Inadequate or no representation* in Government service (d) *Inadequate representation* in the field of trade, commerce and industry.

provide any mental or moral relief to the Backward Classes and enlightenment among them would mean the rejection of this social order.¹⁹

The Central Government in its memorandum of action on the Kaka Kalelkar Report was surprised to learn that more than one third of India's population was identified and 'listed' as backward.²⁰ Adding to this, the population of women and Scheduled Castes and Tribes would mean that a vast majority are 'backward,' prominently due to the 'caste system'. However, as we had seen earlier, 'safeguards' were conceptualised, among other things, as reserving a minority of seats. This conceptualization could be justified only if the 'backward' remain a minority in numbers. Clearly, the exercise of identification had taken the line way beyond the imagined mark. Thus, the government argued that the implementation of Kaka Kalelkar report would 'swamp' the 'most needy' under the multitudes of identified 'backwards'.

Secondly, the Central Government believed making caste a criterion would only lead to 'separatism' and thereby threaten the integrity of the nation-state. Thus, more 'objective criteria' should be evolved in order to identify the 'backward' groups. K.C. Yadav in his book points out that there was no extensive discussion on the first report in the Parliament. For detailed accounts on the history and politics of the OBC category one can always go back to Marc Galanter,²¹ Harnam Singh Verma,²² K.C. Yadav,²³ G. Aloysius,²⁴ Narendra Bedide (Kuffir Nalgundwar),²⁵ and Khalid Anis Ansari,²⁶ among others. It was decided that respective state governments would devise their own conditions to identify 'backwardness'. Thus, the conceptualization of OBC was nationally suspended for a long interval, only to resurface with the Mandal Commission glaringly after the 1990s. During this significant interval, more than ten state governments produced around twenty reports on backward classes. It has been at the level of the state or the region that backward

¹⁹ Ambedkar, B.R., Buddha and the Future of his Religion, *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, Vol.17, Part II, pp. 97-108. (Accessed from http://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf on 10/09/2018)

²⁰ 2399 Castes/Communities were listed as backward Classes in the Kalelkar Report. The list was majorly prepared on the basis of the data available with the Department of education on scholarships.

²¹ See Galanter Marc, *Competing Equalities: Law and The Backward Classes in India*. California: University of California Press, 1984.

²² See Verma, Harnam Singh. *The OBCs and the ruling classes in India*. Manohar, Delhi, 2005.

²³ K.C. Yadav's seminal work '*India's Unequal Citizens: A Study of Other Backward Classes*' along with meticulous and comprehensive details of backward classes, painstakingly analyses the media coverage of anti-Mandal agitations. Yadav, K. C., & Singh, R. (1994). *India's Unequal Citizens: A Study of Other Backward Classes*. Manohar, Delhi.

²⁴ See Aloysius, G. *The Brahminical Inscribed in Body-Politic*. Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2010. & Aloysius, G. *Contextualizing Backward Classes Discourse*. Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2016.

²⁵ See Kuffir Nalgundwar's essays - *Bahujan and Brahmins: Why their realities shall always collide, not converge; It's caste, stupid; Caste and the Sari* to name a few. Accessible on www.roundtableindia.co.in

²⁶ Khalid Anis Ansari's essays in www.roundtableindia.co.in and www.countercurrents.org

classes emerged as a creative category to help comprehend, identify and sub-categorise various groups that *lie in-between* the ruling elite and the hindu-listed scheduled castes. This exercise has been dynamic in states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar etc. Sub-categorization and the demand for the same has a much longer history at the regional level, precisely because the region comprehends the list better (Somebody from Kerala would have no clue about the castes named in the Bihar OBC list and vice-versa). In the state reports, one also finds the most trenchant critique of the ‘advanced classes’ and their dilution of the caste question. For example, in the introduction of Havannur Commission Report (Karnataka) the chairperson interestingly argues that if ‘caste’ should not be made the criteria to identify backwardness, the Constitution should have simply abolished it.²⁷ Also one finds examples of reconciliations and compromises in the State Reports and subsequent decisions. For example, in 1978, backward class reservations in Bihar could be implemented only after the invention of two new sub-categories of backwardness - ‘women’ and ‘economically weaker sections.’ This was clearly done to dilute upper-caste protests against backward class reservations. Shanti Bhushan, the then Union Law Minister explains that though the new sub-categories were theoretically open to all castes, it was beyond doubt that upper-caste women and upper-caste poor would appropriate them most effectively. In other words, *women* and *poor* served as proxies for upper-caste quota. They were categories of appeasement against lower-castes of all genders. The introductions of these categories also meant a reduction in the reservation for OBCs and EBCs from 26% to 20% in Bihar at the time of its implementation.²⁸

OBC has mostly been a non-national category. Even its national conceptualization by the Mandal Commission is based on state-level averages of socio-economic and educational indicators. Its national life is recent and sporadic. We would argue that anyone interested in the OBC question can make sense of it by focusing on the region. One finds that scholars with a purely national focus (situated anywhere) are annoyed by the size of the category, thus trying to deal with it using racialized indicators of unruliness, dominance etc., often reducing the entire category to a few castes visible from Delhi. On the other hand, scholarship sensitive to the region, has patiently unravelled the category, dissecting its diverse constituents often commenting on variations even within the larger castes. For example, in Uma Chakravarti’s book *‘Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens’* which has been canonized as a textbook in women’s studies deals with OBC as Yadav, Jat, Kurmi and Koeri reiterating their regional dominance but social and educational backwardness. The book does not tell us anything about their numbers, places, languages, regional variations, land ownership patterns etc.²⁹ On the other hand, Prasanna Kumar Chaudhary and Srikant’s book *‘Bihar Mein Samajik Parivartan Ke Kuch Ayam,’* an indispensable text for students or scholars working on Bihar, provides a systematic break-up of OBC in Bihar, underlining the fact that the majority of this category are numerically insignificant castes and tribes counted as

²⁷ See Havannur, L. G. *Karnataka Backward Classes Commission Report Vol. 1 Part 1 Main Report*, 1975.

²⁸ For details see Shanti Bhushan, *Bihar Formula*, Times of India, June 16, 2006. Link: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Bihar-formula/articleshow/1651685.cms> accessed on 13/01/2019.

²⁹ For details see Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Sage Publications Pvt. Limited, 2018.

Extremely Backward Classes in state parlance.³⁰ Similarly, larger castes like Ahirs are caste-clusters which show regional and linguistic variations within Bihar. These variations have meant different histories of possession and dispossession. Emphatic scholars, including anti-caste scholars such as Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, often distort OBC as a vague equivalent of the imagined varna category called 'Shudra'.³¹ It is only through a regional focus that one would bring to fore the multiple caste/non-caste identities and faith systems within this category. One should embrace OBC as a register of heterogeneity which can act as an important framework to evaluate the working of the region, and thereby the Indian state.

It should be noted that by the time Mandal Commission was appointed in late 1970s, there was already a long history of state-level interpretations of backwardness and persistent political and legal challenges to those interpretations by 'upper-castes' (Oniel Biswas and M.J. Antony give detailed accounts of the legal restraints accomplished by the 'forwards').³² Thus, the Mandal Commission had to sail through layers of 'judicial' utterances on 'backwardness' which often privileged 'equality of opportunity' over exceptional safeguards. If one compares the two national reports (a detailed comparison would require another paper) one would find that the indicator of 'low-status within hindu caste hierarchy' in the first report is replaced with 'social backwardness of a class of citizens' in the Mandal Commission report. Though 'caste' continued to be a decisive criterion in both reports, it was understated, blunted and disciplined in the Mandal Commission report. Similarly, while the Kalelkar report invoked representation in trade, commerce, public employment and education, the Mandal Commission report did not have any indicator which clearly captured representation in trade, commerce, higher education or public employment. The reason for such dilutions can be partially explained by the judicial restraints pressed on the Mandal Commission's enquiries.³³ Nevertheless, detailed studies are required to understand them further. While one only refers to the Mandal Commission in the context of reservations in higher education and state employment, it should be noted that one of its central recommendations was radical land

³⁰ For details see Prasanna Kr. Chaudhary & Srikant, *Bihar Mein Samajik Parivartan Ke Kuch Ayam* (Certain Aspects of Social Transformation in Bihar), Vani Prakashan, Delhi 2001.

³¹ Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd's 'Where are the Shudras: Why the Shudras are lost in today's India' published in Caravan magazine on 1st October 2018 was an excellent example of such distortion. In a hurried attempt to nationalize all the communities listed in OBC, Shepherd collapses them with many dominant groups (Nairs, Kammas, Reddies, Patels, Marathas). He achieves this nationalization by calling all of them Shudras. (Accessed from <https://caravanmagazine.in/caste/why-the-shudras-are-lost-in-today-india> on 1/12/2018)

³² Antony, M. J., *Dalit rights: landmark judgements on SC/ST/Backward classes*. Indian Social Institute, 2007; Biswas, A. R., *The supreme court on reservation*. Blumoon Books: Delhi, 2001; Biswas, A. R., *Legal Perspectives on reservations*. Blumoon Books: Delhi, 2001.

³³ It should be noted that the term used to identify backward groups (persistent collectivities) among non-Hindu groups is 'hereditary occupation' and not caste or sub-caste. The use of the term caste and sub-caste (especially the latter) was limited to Hindus alone. This politics of defining caste purely within the ambit of Hinduism is consolidated by the Presidential Order of 1950 which denies SC status to Dalit Christians and Muslims. On the other hand, Sikhism and Buddhism do have 'castes' as they are largely conceptualized as offshoots or reformed versions of Hinduism. The insistence on common roots, place of origin, and legitimization through texts ensured that the empirical presence of caste among Christians and Muslims would be denied.

reforms at a national scale. Similarly, the commission had also proposed political reservation for extremely backward communities.³⁴

It is interesting to note that the Mandal Commission partially acknowledged how certain aspects of women's lives can inform the backwardness of a given community. For example, it included women's work participation rates, age of marriage and access to water as important social indicators to determine backwardness. However, in its recommendations we do not find any specific mention of OBC women. Thus, while gender significantly informed backwardness, it did not inform ways to get over it.³⁵ It is also important to observe that the national women's movement hardly ever engaged with the Mandal Commission or any other Backward Classes Report as a 'women's question'. The much celebrated *Towards Equality Report* (often referred to as the foundational text of women's studies in India) brought out in 1974 spends almost no time in discussing caste as a sociological category which informs gender and class relations. It works with a minimum classification of women above and below lines of subsistence and security.³⁶ The selection of such a category, in the 1970s, needs special attention as the seventies also witnessed the submission of various State Backward Class Reports. It also witnessed appointment of the Second National Backward Class Commission in 1978. In a context where caste was fiercely debated in reports and politics, the report takes a stand of not problematizing caste among women. This decision can be read as a political response to lower caste mobilizations in post-independence India. One needs to study in detail the processes which informed this political stand. Why weren't backward class reports ever recognized as *women's questions* by the national feminist elite?

Women among OBCs or OBC women?

This brings us to the second question of this paper- *How do we begin to understand OBC women's relationship to this category in light of tangible consequences such as education and employment?* We do not have any established body of scholarship which deals with this specific question. Such questions have started appearing only with the entry of a few women from this category in spaces of higher learning. In the Bhojpuri region, like the rest of India, most of the women and men listed as OBCs are not directly affected by this category. OBC women (like most of the men) labour in the backdrop to biologically and socially produce and reproduce a few individuals (dominantly men) who can be made relatively free from economic responsibilities to rightfully claim their opportunities. In other words, the changing classroom social compositions which are often

³⁴ For details – Satyendra P.S., *Mandal Commission: Rashtranirman ki Sabse Badi Pahal* (Mandal Commission: The Biggest Step in Nation-Building), Leftword Books and Free Media, Delhi, 2018, pp. 220-230.

³⁵ The National Commission on Backward Classes, after studying the Mandal Commission and several State Commission Reports, devised a revised set of guidelines to include communities in the Central OBC list. The new guidelines include indicators such as: communities that have graduates and matriculates 20% less than the state or district average; communities with less than proportionate representation in top bureaucracy and public offices as per state average; communities which lost very little or no land as per the agricultural land ceiling acts of respective states; communities identified with traditionally stigmatized or undignified occupations, nomadic and denotified tribes etc. For details see – www.ncbc.nic.in

³⁶ For details see Guha, Phulrenu. *Towards equality: Report of the committee on the status of women in India*. Government of India, Ministry of Education & Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare, 1974.

celebrated are built on the backs of marginalized women and men. This is not to say that women are not entering the classrooms from this region. It is largely a stunted, new phenomenon (limited to urban areas), typically after a critical gap of one to two to three generations after their male counterparts. Here, one does not blame those few select men, nor does one intend to further racial ideas such as OBC patriarchy. In fact, Anu Ramdas in her thought-provoking essay *'My Man'* argues that exclusive, category-driven comments on male-dominance, 'leaves the structural edifice of caste untouched and leaves the complicity of the rest of the society, (including feminism that selectively ignores or focuses on caste), in the 'violent politics of caste patriarchy', happily unexamined.'³⁷ The knowledge about one's own man or men whom we live with or men who are part of our life-sustaining networks is an important part of women's liberation. Dalit-bahujan women's knowledge about their oppression involves sharp insights about the historical subordination of their own men, children and elders. It is this knowledge that shapes and would continue to shape lower-caste women as political actors. It is a fact that most of the OBCs (and SCs or STs) never had any concrete experience of state-driven middle-class social security. In other words, the government jobs of the Nehruvian era, that provided housing, pension, provident fund etc. were largely, usurped by upper-castes, who could, as a result, free their men and women to occupy institutions of higher learning and public employment. One does not have those opportunities anymore.

Further, any 'family or caste based' category such as 'OBC' tacitly assumes the co-operation of unpaid gendered labour and irrational allegiance to the most representative male authority as pre-conditions. Recently, a close friend from the sheep-rearing community (in Bihar?) eloped with an upper-caste boy in the hope of love and improved access to 'competition coaching' in Delhi. She was successful only in her second attempt of elopement. She had left with none of her original educational certificates, and it was only very recently that she accessed those originals after several rounds of negotiations with her father. This friend, a first-generationer, had no category certificate with her. Can she make one? In Bihar, like in other states, you need the close co-operation of your endogamous family to get a certificate made. Typically, for an OBC certificate in Bihar one requires a permanent address proof, caste proof from the panchayat duly attested and investigated by the Tehsildar, and preferably a caste certificate of one's father or a member of the paternal family. Now, if one is in conflict with one's family, like this friend or any other non-normative individual (transgenders or those who have embraced a new faith) is it possible to supersede the family to get a certificate made? In Bihar, where if you have eloped, the entire panchayat would know about your whereabouts, can one reach the panchayat office without the knowledge of the family? If one can miraculously do so, would the panchayat official entertain one without a male family member, to 'prove' one's caste? In the Bhojpuri region one would rarely find women venturing out to government offices without male family members or an educated go-getter. Brothers, husbands, fathers accompanying women for school/intermediate exams is a common sight. Now, your ordeal does not simply end with visits to Panchayat or Tehsil office. With all those certificates you are supposed to approach the nearest CSC (or Common Service Centre) which would process your certificate in Bihar. Unlike SC or ST certificates, OBC certificates require to be furnished regularly due to the creamy-layer criteria. The problems get even more complex for first-generationers who come from numerically insignificant castes, for the official

³⁷ Anu Ramdas, *My Man*, Savari, July 4 2012. Link: <http://www.dalitweb.org/?p=874>, accessed on 12/12/2018.

may even doubt its presence in the area. The state largely expects you to be well-behaved and stay within ascriptive identities and gender-roles to lay claims to 'special provisions.'³⁸

OBC women in Bhojpuri region face numerous problems which are closely linked to its socio-economic structures. A continuing condition of non-literacy and post-literacy³⁹ are fundamental problems. Non-recognition of one's mother tongue, unpaid labour, increasing intensity of agricultural labour due to male out-migration, lack of protein-rich diet, fragmented, progressively reducing land-holdings, overcrowding of villages, inter and intra-caste violence over land and other resources, chronic litigation, child marriage, high rates of school drop-out, total absence of higher education, the threat of being reduced to traditional occupations due to the persistent absence of a non-farm sector, lack of basic infrastructure,⁴⁰ absence and increasing privatization of health services, the cultural and economic implication to serve the brahmin priestly class and observe new, alien festivals and fasts, continuing practices of untouchability and its gender burden are some of them. One wonders if OBC can be a critical category to understand these realities.

These problems cannot be resolved through reservations, a point well admitted in the Mandal Commission Report. They are deeper and require much broader structural transformations. Having said that, does OBC present any possibilities, especially for its women? One can surely agree that OBC has opened up many new conversations. Mahima Yadav's recently submitted thesis discusses the presence of OBC women in the higher education of Bhojpuri-speaking Uttar Pradesh. She argues that the category has helped women bargain with their families to continue their education. It has also helped them introduce many new discussions within the family and the community.⁴¹ Unlike the generally accepted paradigm that *women's questions* were discussed and resolved in the early twentieth century, one finds it being discussed today more than ever amongst marginalized sections. Whether we should delay our marriage? Can we marry outside our caste? Can we not marry at all? Will we find a decent, modern job? How do we fight negative images within higher education? How do we learn English? - are all discussed today more than ever. OBC as a category makes strange bedfellows out of riled castes and tribes often providing an opportunity to step outside one's immediate *jaati* and initiate a dialogue.

The OBC category names several productive castes and tribes in its many lists. This act of 'naming' sheds light on the fact that caste is fundamentally a production relation driven by specific contradictions, a point incisively argued by Kuffir Nalgundwar in several essays.⁴² For example,

³⁸ The list of documents for OBC certificate in Bihar include - Proof of Address, Proof of Age, Passport size photograph, an affidavit for caste from nearest Tehsil, if any family member is already having caste certificate then copy of that, Proof for caste from any local authority like panchayat, Aadhaar Card.

³⁹ A term used by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to denote a condition of forgetting how to read or write in the absence of a literary culture.

⁴⁰ Bihar decorates the bottom rungs of infrastructure index as per the Finance Commission Reports.

⁴¹ For details, Mahima Yadav, *Jaati Anubhavon Par Chintan ke Kuch Bayaan (A few Reflection on Caste Experiences)*, Unpublished MPhil Thesis, Delhi University (Kendriya Shiksha Sansthan), 2018.

⁴² Kuffir Nalgundwar (op.cit.)

naming ‘cattle-rearing’ castes would also force one to understand cattle as an instrument of labour, means of production and as a product in itself. It would tell us how the lives of several OBC and SC groups and its women evolved out of their constant interactions and dissociations with the cattle.⁴³ The recent *Indian Express* story on the Gawalis (buffalo herders) in Nashik (Maharashtra) can serve as an example. Due to severe water scarcity, villages are emptying out in Nashik. However, the responsibility of over two thousand buffaloes makes relocation a very difficult task for the Gawalis. While men have to procure suitable land on lease for their animals in the migration destination, women have to stay back and put in more labour to fetch water and fodder for the buffaloes.⁴⁴ Such interactions do not form a definitive feature of upper-caste lives. On the other hand, such interactions tell us how the ‘caste system’ is a skewed mode of production where lower-castes are primarily producers and upper-castes are primarily consumers. The latter also decide the conditions and objects of production.⁴⁵

A focus on production may also help us recover faith systems as a critique of brahmanism, something creatively done by Kancha Ilaiah in his work.⁴⁶ Naaz Khair in her essay ‘*Who are the beneficiaries of cow violence?*’ reviews how the ‘Make in India’ programme subsidizes capital accumulation in key sectors with the help of a caste-mode of production. Commenting specifically on dairy, beef and meat industries, she argues that the state, on one hand, would make local businesses of Ahirs, Kasais, Meos, Chamars unviable through constant cow vigilantism, spiritual fear-mongering and anti-cow slaughter legislations and, on the other hand, promote direct foreign investment in these very sectors.⁴⁷

OBC can possibly help us center commodities such as iron, copper, gold, vegetables, cotton, goat, sheep, glass, clay, silk, jute, bamboo so on and so forth as objects which have definitive consequences on production, livelihood, gendered-relations, mobility/immobility, aspirations, faith systems, state policy, consumption etc. It may also help one to connect to global changes, setting-up new ways of knowing. This may not lead to rosy pictures of a unified productive class, and would possibly take us to many contradictions and frustrations. However, these academic and

⁴³ See Asha Singh, *Cow, Backwardness and Bahujan Women*, Round Table India, July 10, 2017. Link: http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9125:cow-backwardness-and-bahujan-women&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132

⁴⁴ Kavitha Iyer & Parthasarathy Biswas, *Parched Villages begin to empty out in drought hit Maharashtra*, Indian Express, Nov. 21, 2018. Link: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/parched-villages-begin-to-empty-out-in-drought-hit-maharashtra-5456398/> accessed on 13/01/2019.

⁴⁵ For details see Kuffir Nalgundwar, *It's Caste, Stupid*, Round Table India, April 26 2013. Link: http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6495:it%E2%80%99s-caste,-stupid&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132, accessed on 12/01/2019

⁴⁶ For details see Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture and political economy*. Samya, Calcutta, 1996.

⁴⁷ Naaz Khair, *Who are the beneficiaries of Cow Violence?* Round Table India, 15th September 2018. Link: http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9458:who-are-the-beneficiaries-of-cow-violence&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132, accessed on 13/01/2019.

political efforts are far better than contemporary attempts to racialize this mega-category as casteist die-hards who are gullible and violent. There is a need to move beyond the truism that castes are casteist.

The Mandal Commission report, in its concluding chapter conceptualizes reservation as a way to undo the permanence of caste lives. Reservation was imagined as an exceptional step to change perceptions of power and who can be powerful. It aimed at a cognitive transformation. It is important for any democracy to list successful individuals from every social section to maintain its legitimacy. However, such cognitive transformations have largely bypassed OBC women of the Bhojpuri region. The privilege of *not becoming one's caste-assigned role* is largely reserved for a miniscule section of men. Women have to continue their roles to ensure and sustain this limited miracle.

Rabri Devi (the first and probably the only OBC woman chief minister) is celebrated as an ultimate success story in the first author's community. The prerequisites of this story include total commitment to caste endogamy and duties. One does not find any method or attempt to understand Rabri Devi as a cognitive transformation which dismantles caste. Rather, it seems that only a re-inscription of caste-gender relations in new spaces can help produce her success. In other words, if you want to be successful as a Yadav woman you should be sincere with your ordained roles (which includes a love for cattle and cattle-rearing). On the other hand, Delhi-based journalists and scholars portray Rabri Devi as an ultimate metaphor of non-meritocracy, rurality, domesticity, illiteracy etc. One of the earliest interviews of Rabri Devi by Tavleen Singh is an excellent example of this portrayal.⁴⁸ It is significant to see how 'through the interview' two women separated by educational attainments, caste locations, history, geography, language and legacy enter into an unequal dialogue. The convent-educated, *savarna* Delhi journalist who comes from a family of who's who in national bureaucracy places herself in a position of moral authority to judge and evaluate an OBC woman who is a decade younger than her. The right to judge is surely an outcome of her being a powerful interviewer. The fact that Tavleen could not make any conversational connect with Rabri Devi only tells us how categories such as 'Indian women' can be sociologically empty.

Like Tavleen, Madhu Kishwar also conceptualizes Rabri Devi as a metaphor for 'beti-bahu brigade', 'feminine slavery' and ignorance. In her well-cited essay, *Logic of Quotas*, she expresses the fear of 'Rabri Devis' occupying the parliament as opposed to independent-minded women. She categorically places Rabri as a bad influence on women in politics. According to Kishwar, women like Rabri are ready to go to any extent to support their men.⁴⁹ Both Tavleen and Kishwar put up their attack against Rabri Devi as 'independent-minded women,' as unmarked human subjects. Through their discourse they willingly place themselves and their class of women/

⁴⁸ Tavleen Singh interviews Rabri Devi in 1997 for a programme named *'Ek Din Ek Jeevan'*. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRUA0F-kYpg> Throughout the interview, Tavleen displays historical ignorance (of national proportion) of how education as a 'public good' was imagined and implemented in Bihar through the 20th century. She also displays typical ignorance on why certain communities were listed as 'backward' and how these communities mobilized themselves in the past hundred years. The cultural references of constructive recreational activities (such as reading books) emerges from the interviewer's own class-caste-spatial locations.

⁴⁹ Kishwar, Madhu. *The logic of quotas*. Manushi Issue.107, 1998.

‘decent people’ in opposition to Rabri Devi. One wonders if Rabri Devi was a caste or an individual for Tavleen Singh or Madhu Kishwar?



*Rabri Devi in her Chamber: A screenshot from the interview*⁵⁰

The same question can be asked of Rabri Devi’s community. Clearly, neither the national elite nor her own caste view her as an autonomous individual or pioneering political actor. This impasse or deadlock which betrays and debases what Babasaheb Ambedkar would call the ‘cultivation of human personality’ is something which OBC women need to challenge and overcome. One finds this challenge in Phoolan Devi who argued that OBC women’s quota in Women’s Reservation Bill⁵¹ is not simply a political decision but also a social programme. She categorically stated in the parliamentary debate of 1996–

अध्यक्ष जी, आपको पता होगा ही कि हमारी पिछड़ी हुई महिलाएं बस घूंघट डालना जानती हैं , बाहर निकलना नहीं जानती हैं. जब उनके लिए रिजर्वेशन होगा तो वे बाहर निकलेंगी और अपनी लड़ाई लड़ सकेंगी।*⁵²

⁵⁰ In the second part of interview when Tavleen asks Rabri whether an illiterate person is fit to be a chief Minister, she responds by saying ‘We have ears, we have eyes, we see what’s going on around us.’ Ibid.

⁵¹ OBC women as a category gains national attention only with the Women’s Reservation Bill of 1996. It is also common knowledge that the entire debate is caricatured as one between upper-caste women scholars and OBC male parliamentarians.

⁵² English Transliteration: adhyaksha ji, aapko pata hoga hi ki hamaari mahilayen pichhdi huyee mahilayen bus ghoonghat daalna jaanti hain, baahar nikalna nahin janti hain. Jab unke liye reservation hoga to we baahar niklengi aur apni ladai lad sakengi

Honourable Speaker, you know our backward women only know how to wear a *ghoongat* (veil), they do not know how to come out. When there would be reservations for them, they would come out and fight their own fights.

Phoolan Devi, imagines a life beyond '*Ghoongat*' a sharp metaphor of gender oppression, a life which would dismantle the permanence of caste. Moving beyond the frameworks set by one's own caste (or sometimes even 'category' men) and the established intellectual class is something that OBC women should constantly strive for. This would mean a perpetual engagement with every universal category of analysis, emancipation and transformation. This would mean moving beyond 'OBC' or any other State prescriptions of empowerment. It would mean showing 'OBC' its historical place in the long journey of productive communities in the subcontinent.



*Phoolan Devi: Screenshot from a Press Conference*⁵³

In lieu of a Conclusion

The first part of this paper provided a bird's eye view of how backwardness and backward classes were conceptualized and schooled in the sub-continent. The second part asked a few exploratory questions of OBC as a category and its relationship to women listed as 'OBCs'. In doing so, we aimed at opening new conversations on the category, its usefulness and many limits. Clearly, OBC cannot be an overbearing category which defines every experience and problem of groups listed under it. If one makes it such an absolute category, one may end up schooling the masses within a

⁵³ 'Phoolan Devi: Caste System should have vanished from our country' published by Wild Films India on Youtube. Link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqkwKJ6BIaU>

framework of 'backwardness' defined by the state for its own purpose. However, if the category provides a starting point to mobilize for more substantive goals, it should be critically embraced. Such an embrace should necessarily involve the process of redefining the category as an index of regional heterogeneity. In other words, one should realize that OBC is a category which can be politically and academically resilient at a regional scale, as it is ultimately an account of regional caste/class-based power relations. Nationalizing the category only leads to mass invisibility of its content. Women share an opaque relationship with the category as it provides fixed notions of gender-relations, labour, family, religion and community. Does the category help women or men shake the permanence of caste? Or does it reinscribe them in new spaces? Clearly, our experience proves that one need not unconditionally deify any category. A constant look out for universal ideas and programmes of emancipation should be our ultimate goal. In doing so, we should cut the clutter surrounding state-categories and evaluate it for its real content.