

2b or not to 2b? Exclusive 'Muslim' quota needs to be re-evaluated

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The recent scrapping of Category 2B, which exclusively included 'Muslims,' from the Karnataka state Backward Classes (BC) list by the BJP government has sparked off a debate in the run-up to assembly polls.

But let's look closely at the changes. In Karnataka, based on the Justice O Chinnappa Reddy Commission report, the Deve Gowda-led Janata Dal government reconfigured the reservation matrix in 1994. In particular, the BCs were subcategorised into Category 1 (4%), 2A (15%), 2B (4%), 3A (4%), and 3B (5%). The incumbent BJP government has scrapped 2B, which exclusively housed 'Muslim' as a caste, and relocated it to the EWS (10%) quota. Simultaneously, it has rechristened Categories 3A and 3B, which included the Vokkaligas and Lingayats, though not exclusively, as 2C and 2D. The 4% released by scrapping the 2B Muslim quota has been employed to expand 2C (from 4% to 6%) and 2D (from 5% to 7%), respectively. The opposition expectedly has decried the move as another instance of BJP's anti-Muslim stance. However, Category 1 and Category 2A already includes many backward class Muslims and both these categories have not been tampered with. In other words, with the scrapping of Category 2B, mostly privileged Muslim castes have been relocated. Previously, all Muslim groups were included, with 2B constituting an exclusive 'Muslim' quota. Is an exclusive religion-based quota tenable?



PIX CAPTION fine print: The scrapping of 2B category by Karnataka affects mostly privileged Muslim castes

Historically, the colonial practice of religion-based electorates and quotas was discarded after Independence as religion had become a suspect category due to Partition. Both the First (1955) and Second (1979) Backward Class Commissions, popularly known as the Kaka Kalelkar Commission and Mandal Commission, refrained from treating Muslims as a monolithic, socially backward community and excluded the privileged castes/groups within them. Interestingly, the central OBC list for Karnataka also excludes privileged Muslim groups like the Cutchi Memon, Navayat, Bohra, Sayyid, Sheik, Pathan Mughal, Mahdavi, and Konkani or Jamayati Muslims. However, in category 2B, the residual Muslim castes – privileged and lowered – were clubbed together, with the possibility of the former cornering the quota benefits owing to their cultural capital. If we map the BC quota framework employed by the Centre and states, Karnataka and Kerala form the glaring exceptions in having exclusive Muslim quotas.

The exception can be explained by three factors. First, the historical dominance of the anti-Brahmin movements in Karnataka, where all non-Brahmin communities were considered backward and inadequately represented in power structures. This enabled the invisibilisation of hegemonies in other communities. Secondly, the discursive grip of the orthodox orientalist-colonial frame in understanding caste. Caste, a secular category that organised pan-religion symbolic, erotic, and material life in South Asia, was religionised and incorporated as an internal moment of Hinduism. This view, shared widely by the anti-caste tradition and policymakers, renders caste in putatively egalitarian non-Hindu communities, particularly Muslims and Christians, an illegitimate category. However, sociological evidence clearly demonstrates caste-based discrimination in subcontinental Islam and Christianity. Thirdly, the continuing sway of what political scientist Paul Brass phrases as the “myth of Muslim decline into backwardness” can be traced back to the Hunter Commission Report (1882), wherein the entire Muslim community was spuriously characterised as disadvantaged based on the exceptional data of Bengal. If one reads closely, all the Karnataka BC commission reports – Miller Committee (1918), Havanur Commission (1975), O Chinnappa Reddy Commission (1990), and so on—are struggling with how to account for caste among Muslims and the myth of all Muslims as a backward category.