

Research Foundation for Governance: in India

Summary of the public debate

CASTE CENSUS: REQUIRED OR REGRESSIVE

June 10, 2010 at Ahmedabad Management Association, 5.30 PM to 7.00 PM

On Thursday, 10th June 2010, Research Foundation for Governance in India (RFGI), organised a public debate on the topic 'Caste Census: Required or Regressive'. The venue for the debate, Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA) saw a large number of young participants from various colleges and universities turning up for the event which lasted for an hour and a half.

Before commencement of the debate the participants were briefed about RFGI through a short, 5 minute documentary movie. Vinita Choudhury, a law student at GNLU Gandhinagar and presently an intern at RFGI gave a short introductory speech about the debate. The debate was then open but only after Ms. Dhru, the moderator of the debate had spelt out the rules for the debate.

Prof. Mihir Upadhyaya, a Sanskrit professor initiated the discussion by explaining the history behind the caste system in India; how it degraded from a workable method of division of labour to being a pre-decided ascribed status which was decided by birth. He also told the participants present that how it is believed that it was through a Brahman's body that the other castes were born; thereby underlying the hierarchy in the caste system.

The first question that was posed by Ms. Kanan Dhru was whether the caste system was a reality in India. One participant pointed at the matrimonial columns and how they still put 'caste' as a criterion for marriage in unambiguous terms. A view that 'caste' is slowly being dissolved was discarded. It was believed that people, especially in rural India still identified strongly with their caste.

One participant spoke about how he felt that such differences can be 'celebrated' instead of 'degraded'. He pointed out that a mere change in the way we speak about caste can make the difference between celebration and degradation. With



Research Foundation for Governance: in India

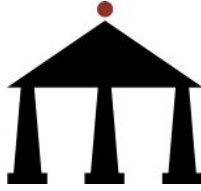
the debate hinging upon 'differences' and 'division', Josh Rennie, a law student from Scotland who is interning at RFGI told the audience how even in Britain 'class' is still a strong, though very less spoken basis of divisions in the society.

The participants generally agreed that caste was a reality in India. Prof. Upadhyay was of the belief that caste system cannot be removed. A young student leader contended that all efforts should be made to get rid of the caste system and that such a pessimistic view must be discarded. Prof. Upadhyay then came up with an interesting analogy, comparing the caste system with a wide spread malaria. He explained that only if we make a correct and informed diagnosis of the disease can it be uprooted. He thus hinted at the necessity of the caste census and the need for authentic data about caste. Nevertheless, many believed that not taking a caste census is not going to help India's cause in any way.

Some participants however came up strongly against the view that caste census is a necessity. According to them the data which the Election Commission and other statutory bodies have was good enough. Others were of the belief that the Nandan Nilekani headed UID project will bring better and objective results and to accomplish this, inclusion of caste data in the census would be necessary.

It was difficult to stop the debate from hitting the 'reservation' bell. And the bell did ring many a times. A point was raised as to whether the caste census is being conducted only for the furtherance of reservations. A participant pointed out how this information might be misused by politicians for their vested interests and asked the participants whether the government had come out with any announcement regarding how the 'caste data' will be used. Many other participants too questioned the motive of the government behind this proposal.

Another participant spoke about how she believed that such a step was being introduced too late. This was countered by the cliched argument of 'better late than never'. A member, who is also an enumerator told how the census exercise has been facing severe logistic problems and that such utopian beliefs will never see the desired action on the part of the government.



Research Foundation for Governance: in India

It was clear from the debate that the participants were increasingly in favour of a caste based census. Without having the correct data, how can effective policies be formulated, they argued. Some believed that this could be the first step towards ensuring that the creamy layer is kept out of reservations.

These debates, according to Ms. Kanan Dhru will now be a monthly feature and be regularly held in the premises of AMA. The motive of these debates is to encourage the youth openly discuss about political and social topic and come up with informed decisions regarding the issues.