

Students and doctors protest reservation/affirmative-action system in India, 2006-2008

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [\(mainly or initiated by\) student participants](#) [2]

Timing

April

2006

to:

May

2008

Location and Goals

Country:

India

Location City/State/Province:

Most major cities in India

Location Description:

Streets and public places

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Stop expanding the reservation system (drop legislation mandating it) and improve the education system.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 024. Symbolic lights>Candle vigils
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 051. Walk-outs
- 062. Student strike
- 114. Limited strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 114. Limited strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 024. Symbolic lights>Candle vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Notes on Methods:

There was a large gap from 2006 to 2008 in action, which was revitalized by the Supreme Court decision to accept the expansion of reservation.

Segment Length:

Approximately 4 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Medical Students
- doctors
- engineers
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

University medical students

Partners:

Youth for Equality (anti-reservation group)

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Doctors (exit)
- Students
- doctors
- engineers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Engineers (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 4 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Indian government, pro-reservation movement

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The pro-reservation movement held its own protests and rallies defending the government's decision.

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Police baton charged and beat protesters, arrested them and sprayed them with water cannons.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

4 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the goals of the protesters were not met, the movement did grow and groups like Youth for Equality are

still active today and seek reform through politics, not protest.

India has maintained much of its traditional caste system, which separates communities based on the socioeconomic status of the communities' forefathers. Early 20th century constitutional reforms prevented the kind of medieval discrimination that used to make some castes literally 'untouchable'. The untouchables were replaced by what are referred to as 'scheduled tribes' (STs), 'scheduled castes' (SCs) and 'other backward castes' (OBCs) that collectively refer to India's socioeconomically disadvantaged people. Combined, they represent about 85% of India's population.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a civil rights champion and author of India's 1949 constitution, incorporated into it a kind of affirmative action program for the scheduled castes and tribes. This program, called "reservation" required that a certain percentage of posts be reserved for the SCs and STs in government operations, including civil services and schools. This was expanded to the OBCs in 1951 and reservation has been expanding ever since. In 2006, the Indian government promised to implement a 27% reservation for OBCs, which would decrease the General (non-reserved) pool from 77.5% to 50.5% (to which reserved applicants can also apply). This was in response to the 93rd constitutional amendment, which allowed the government to advance the situations of the socioeconomically "backward".

Students and professionals felt that this decision was unjust because it did not create a level playing field for everyone, was a misinterpretation of the law, and was disrespectful to "backward" people. In late April 2006, shortly after the 27% announcement, around 1,000 medical students walked out of classes and began protesting in the capital. The rally, which drew Delhi University and regular school students, included waving banners with statements like 'Believe in Intelligence, Don't dilute excellence'. At Jantar Mantar, pro-reservation (the All India Minorities Front) and anti-reservation rallies met peacefully.

On 13 May, Police beat twenty-eight medical students with lathis (batons) as the students attempted to enter the Raj Bhavan (Government House) in Mumbai. Immediately, students and resident doctors began to protest. On 14 May, 100 students and doctors pledged to not work and to hunger strike indefinitely. Even as the government mandated that doctors return to their posts, the protesters refused to operate hospitals or schools. A group called Youth for Equality, created by the anti-reservation movement, began to petition for a reversal of the reservation policy. They also called for a reevaluation of the whole system and for the ultimate removal of the caste system. Their 2,500-person signature petition at IIT Roorkee (a technical university) failed to generate any political response. Meanwhile, the hunger strike expanded to 150 people as it was continued as relay strike that lasted about a month.

Other forms of protest included a candlelight march on 18 May in Chandigarh, IIT Delhi students forming a human chain on 20 May, a Youth for Equality march on 23 May, individual hunger strikes, boycotting of schools, and protests in front of government buildings in Chennai. Traders in Delhi threatened to shut down their shops to show their solidarity with the anti-reservation movement. On 25 May, the AIIMS Faculty Association went on a mass strike providing only essential medical services, and on 27 May, nearly 100,000 people attended a rally in Delhi.

In response to the protests, the government created an Oversight Committee to reevaluate the implementation of the 27% mandate. On 13 August, the Committee issued a report stating that the government would not go back on this initiative. Doctors returned to hospitals under pressure from the Supreme Court and due to the poor conditions of many patients.

The protests still continued, however, in sporadic events led primarily by Youth for Equality, which expanded its goals into a more political realm, demanding education for all, more transparency in government, and a

casteless society. Their strikes included a hunger strike supported by engineers on 24 December 2006, a large protest at Connaught Place, New Delhi on 6 May 2008, a hunger strike and candle march at MAMC, Delhi on 23 May 2008, and another candle march on the 25th at BHU, Varanasi. During these protests there was noticeably more police violence than there was in 2006, including the use of batons and water cannons.

The support for the protests dropped significantly when the Supreme Court upheld the expansion of reservation on 10 April 2008. Their decision was a result of a public litigation case (Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs. Union of India) that challenged the 93rd constitutional amendment and the Reservation in Admission Bill (2006). Their opinion included a recommendation to exclude the "creamy layer" (the socially or economically advantaged citizens who would otherwise qualify for reservations) from the reservations process and that Parliament should make a deadline for free and mandatory education for all Indian children. A 2010 report shows that reservation is not in full effect as only 7% of OBCs are in their reserved spots in government sponsored positions, meaning that 20% of the spots are vacant or used by other groups.

Research Notes

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