

# WHY ARE THE MARATHAS MOBILISING NOW?

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November 29, 2023 01:38 am | Updated 07:33 am IST

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Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange Patil. File | Photo Credit: ANI

The Maratha mobilisation for reservation in higher education and public employment has reached its peak with the protesters issuing an ultimatum to the government. The Marathas desperately want a reservation that can stand in a court of law. While Marathas have organised mass demonstrations since 2016, it must be noted that from 1953 to 2008, three National Backward Classes Commissions and three Maharashtra State Backward Classes Commissions rejected the Maratha demand to be included in the OBC list. So, what changed in the past two decades which compelled the Marathas to organise massive rallies and even burn the houses of elected Maratha representatives over the reservation question?

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Scholars have attributed the following reasons: agrarian crisis and assertion of OBCs in the rural and urban local bodies. However, I suggest the crisis of dominance explains the current mobilisation of the Maratha reservation. We need to pay attention to the interlinkage between what I call the urban and rural crises.

By urban crisis, I refer to the rapid disappearance of well-paid jobs since the late 1990s in large-scale manufacturing industries and other establishments in urban areas. These avenues provided jobs to individuals with little or no education or vernacular degrees. These jobs paid good salaries, provided healthcare benefits and gave access to social security provisions. Moreover, workers could organise under trade unions and participate in industrial and political actions. It is in such industries that Marathas used their socially superior and dominant caste position to corner a larger share of jobs. For instance, the Bombay Mill Owners Association 1940 survey shows that Marathas cornered more than 50% of well-paid jobs in the textile mills. My 2009 survey also shows that the Maratha dominance continued even during the rapid dwindling of job opportunities. Ethnographic observations and discussions with wide-ranging trade union leaders reveal that Marathas dominated well-paid jobs in other large-scale industries. Since the 1990s, all these companies have either closed or have significantly retrenched their workforce.

In all grades of government, Marathas occupy more than 29% of open-category jobs. Similarly, in Mantralaya (State secretariat), Marathas occupy more than 37% of open-category jobs. The Maratha share is 15.52% in the IAS, 27.85% in the IPS and 17.97% in the IFS. However, since the economic liberalisation, jobs have shrunk in the public sector. Of the total secured jobs

nationwide, merely 3.5% are in the government and 2% in the private formal sector. Moreover, contractual government jobs increased from 0.7 million in 2004–05 to 15.9 million in 2017-18. This means that there is fierce competition among Marathas for a smaller number of government jobs.

Furthermore, jobs in State-owned and State-funded schools and colleges have considerably gone down. In several cases, municipal schools have been shut down, and schoolteachers and college lecturers are hired on contracts. Like individuals across social groups, Maratha youth opted for informal work such as security guards, courier boys, or engaging in the kind of odd jobs clubbed under the nomenclature 'housekeeping'. Those with better education are stuck with contractual jobs. The contractual jobs in the private sector increased from 3.6 million in 2004–05 to 7.1 million in 2017–18.

By rural crisis, I refer to the return of workers from closed factories to their villages and the inability of the rural youth to migrate to urban areas for better-paid employment. Historically, the well-paid urban income provided individuals with the necessary financial support for the rest of their family members in the villages, who took care of the farmlands. In the case of Marathas, it further strengthened their already socially superior and dominant position in the villages. When the factories were running, there was a pattern of workers retiring in the villages and male offspring taking over employment in the city. The disappearance of well-paid jobs has halted this process.

Youth from the rural areas now find themselves going for informal sector jobs. Moreover, they cannot financially support their family members in the villages. They also do not enjoy the respect and pride in rural settings due to their employment in urban areas, something their parents had experienced historically. Therefore, the only way out for the rural Maratha youth are the secured jobs in the public sector, which have considerably shrunk.

Like all social groups, there has been an increase in aspirations for higher education among the Marathas. However, post the 1980s fiscal crisis, many public institutions diversified their sources of funding, which subsequently augmented self-financed public and private institutions. Overall, seats in government institutions have decreased, and private ones have increased. As of 2019, of the total colleges, 64.3% are private and unaided, 13.5% are private and aided and merely 22.2% were managed and run by the government.

As the Yashpal Committee noted, private institutions charge exorbitant fees and have illegal capitation fees that range from 1-10 million for engineering courses, 20-40 million for MBBS courses, 5-12 million for dental courses, and about 30,000-50,000 for courses in arts and science colleges. Like the majority of individuals across social groups, Marathas with less financial resources have to rely on public institutions. Here, Marathas compete for a smaller number of open-category seats.

The combination of the urban and rural crises has resulted in the crisis of dominance for the Marathas. It is further aggravated by the disturbance of caste hierarchy norms due to the educational and economic mobility of a tiny section of Dalits, together with their social, cultural and political assertion. In several cases, the economic and political assertion of the OBCs has created anxiety among the protesting Marathas. These factors explain the current mobilisation of the Marathas on the reservation question. Unless the State increases the share of formal sector jobs and expands public educational institutions (or starts large-scale scholarship programmes for the poor), the Marathas' crisis will continue to persist.

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