

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Caste conflict boils over

*Prime Minister V.P. Singh's attempt at reform of the Indian bureaucracy threatens to spiral into caste war.*

**V**iolent student-led demonstrations have spread across northern India in the month since Prime Minister V.P. Singh's abrupt Aug. 7 announcement of the government's adoption of the Mandal Commission report reserving 27% of all government jobs for the "backward castes."

The protests have already claimed a number of lives in Bihar and Orissa, and the disturbances have spread to major cities of Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat.

Here in the capital, agitating students paralyzed the city on Aug. 27, and, at a Sept. 3 rally that drew 10,000 in the pouring monsoon rain, issued the call for a two-day Delhi-wide strike Sept. 6. In the first strike, dozens of public buses were burnt, hijacked, and stoned, and schools in the city were ordered closed for one month.

With a pro-"reservation" thrust gearing up, to be launched with a Sept. 7 rally in Delhi, many fear the country will be plunged into outright caste warfare.

The issue is both economic and highly emotional. To bring the untouchables and tribals—known as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST)—into the mainstream of society, the government many years ago reserved 22.5% of all jobs for them. The new reservation decision means that now 49.5% of all government jobs are reserved. In a country where jobseekers outnumber jobs by a huge margin, this is a sure-fire detonator.

The situation is in some ways reminiscent of the "affirmative action"

controversy in the United States—only much worse—since there is no solution according to the terms of the conflict, but only if conditions are created for rapid growth and increased productive jobs.

According to the National Front government, positive discrimination in favor of the "teeming millions"—the overwhelming majority of Hindu India belonging to the Scheduled Caste and so-called backward community—is a measure of social reform. The protesters, mostly members of the non-backward castes, claim the policy is "casteist," and threatens to push aside merit as a principle of social organization and advance.

At the heart of the matter is the Mandal Commission report. The commission was set up in 1979 under B.F. Mandal, a Bihar leader and himself a member of a backward caste, to survey the social and educational backwardness of various castes in Hindu society. The report, submitted in December 1980 and placed before the parliament by the late Indira Gandhi in 1982, was never acted on.

Serious questions have meanwhile arisen about the report and its methodology, including scathing critiques by individuals involved in the commission's work. Since after independence from Great Britain in 1947, the obnoxious practice of carrying out caste census was discontinued, the Mandal Commission had to use the 1931 census as its base. Surveys were then conducted in two villages and one town in each district, and the 1931 census was, with the aid of this limited survey, scaled up in a wholly arbitrary manner.

Ultimately the report identified 3,742 castes as socially and educationally "backward." But, by its own admission, a number of these were included simply on the strength of "the public evidence and personal knowledge of the members of the commission."

More broadly, the government's move has called the policy of "positive discrimination" into question. The presence of several backward caste members in the central cabinet and as chief ministers in two of the country's most populous states, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—not to mention the composition of parliament these days—is ample testimony to the fact that political equality has already begun to break down caste barriers. And, in the present setup, political power invariably means economic power.

There are loud accusations that V.P. Singh's "social reform" is nothing but an effort to secure for himself the huge vote that the so-called backward castes represents. The political parties—including the opposition Congress—were all caught off guard by the move, but student agitation quickly brought dissent and disgruntlement to the surface, even within the ruling Janata Dal.

This brewing discontent, laced with alarm at the spreading violence, finally prompted V.P. Singh to convene an all-party meeting Sept. 3. The most persistent demand was that an "economic dimension" must be added to the reservation—in other words, beneficiaries must also be poor—in order to avoid caste conflict over the policy. But the fact that no political party has had the gumption to oppose the policy outright, and V.P.'s insistence that talks notwithstanding there is no turning back on the move, combined to make the high-level parley a distinct non-event.