

People Power

Combining Equity with Efficiency

The recent debate generated by the proposal to reserve 27% seats in Union educational institutions for backward classes has predictably been very shrill and hysterical. Reservation is a classic zero-sum-game issue and polarizes society intensely, as the gains to a social group are matched by losses to another. Prejudice and bitterness in this debate must be overcome by facts and logic. We all need to step back a little and take a deep breath.

There are three critical issues we need to examine before reaching any conclusions. First, even today the future of a child can be predicted fairly accurately at birth based on caste, family and gender in most cases. Such a predictable future determined by the accident of birth and unrelated to abilities and hard work is an unacceptable disgrace in modern civilization. Poor children from deprived sections are as brainy and sharp as others, and yet they seldom fulfil their potential, as opportunities for vertical mobility are denied. As a result, much of the gene pool of our society is wasted. Sustained high growth can be preserved only if we include all social groups in a modern, humane vision of an egalitarian society where all sections are winners. There is a clear and compelling case for strong affirmative action policies to promote equity and opportunity and preserve peace and harmony. Otherwise, violence will become arbiter of social justice. Equity and social harmony cannot be delinked.

Second, our quest for social justice and opportunities for all must be combined with search for excellence. Clearly, in a modern society competence and performance are critical for economic growth, service delivery and governance. We need to devise means of affirmative action which ensure high standards of performance. Third, thousands of youngsters would never have found dignity and opportunity without affirmative action policies. While there are obvious distortions, the fact remains that reservations benefited large sections, and many of them performed creditably once opportunities are provided. Equally, the benefits of reservation are uneven, with families which prospered early through preferential treatment enjoying a huge lead over the poorer, uneducated families.

Given the complexity of the issue and the unevenness of outcomes leading to distortions, there is resentment on both sides. The poorer SCs, STs and OBCs feel cheated by politics of tokenism and lack of access to education and employment. The other sections, particularly the poorer among them, feel discriminated and resent diminishing opportunities relative to demand. Given the enormous hunger for quality education, the availability of seats in institutions of excellence and the perceived fairness of selection are hugely contentious issues.

Can we promote equity with efficiency? Can 'merit' and 'social justice' be made compatible? Can preferential policies be taken out of the prison of zero-sum-game through win-win solutions? Happily, rational solutions are available to these dilemmas. Policy makers and media need to focus on them, instead of indulging in feverish invective and hype. Political expediency, social ostracism and rage must give way to rationality, wisdom and long-term solutions. What, then, can be done?

First, preferential policies must be coupled with incentives for performance, particularly in professional courses and institutions of excellence. This can be done by giving a head start to candidates from disadvantaged groups. For instance, if 90% is the cut off score for general candidates, preferential groups can be admitted at, say 80% or 75%. This provides motivation and incentive to reach a benchmark, and guarantees uniformly high standards. The preferential candidates must be given free, intensive coaching during plus two course to meet these standards.

Second, a 'Means Test' must be adopted for preferential treatment. Among disadvantaged groups, reservations can be primarily for families with low income, and those below a certain grade in government or profession. And among other sections, poor candidates can be guaranteed free tuition, and no student will be denied higher education for want of money. A system of scholarships, endowments and soft loans can be institutionalized.

Third, there is a case for rationalizing the reservations for BCs. Mandal Commission report is over 25 years old, and periodic surveys and reclassification are needed for determining groups deserving preferential treatment and identifying the most backward classes (occupational groups) for special privileges.

Fourth, there is need for deregulation and expansion of higher education to suit the needs of a growing, large economy. Accreditation, academic freedom, rating and transparency instead of licensing and regulation will expand opportunities vastly. In addition, state institutions must significantly expand capacity to meet the demand for quality higher education.

Finally, school education and healthcare must be the corner stones of governance. Tony Blair staked his government's reputation and survival on the quality of education; George Bush was elected in 2000 on the basis of his record in school education as Texas Governor. In India, public policy, political discourse and governance are largely divorced from education. Education engages the attention of politicians and media only when reservations become an issue. The appalling failure of state in social sector is at the heart of persisting inequities.

But those who argue that good school education is a substitute for preferential treatment must recognize that the poor and disadvantaged cannot be held guilty

for monumental governance failure. Neglected groups are hungry for good education and opportunities. Even poor rural Dalits are spending Rs.200 per month per child in the hope of 'convent' education. The nation needs preferential policies **and** good school education. Meanwhile, we can design programmes to combine equity with efficiency.

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