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Opportunity With Quality

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EVER since the news about taking reservation in universities and institutes to 50% came out, there has been a lot of debate on the issue. In a country with huge scarcity in higher education opportunities and jobs, it is understandable why this issue is highly emotive for the youth and middle-class.

Without going into the debate about whether reservations are good or not or whether they should be implemented or not – issues that are likely to be decided largely on political calculations – this note discusses how reservations should be implemented, if they must be implemented.

Reservations for a community are supposed to help the community and not just those few individuals who get a reserved seat. How does admitting a few students through reservation in institutes help the community? Most likely, this happens because individuals who graduate and do well in life create role models for the community, thereby raising overall aspiration levels. Higher aspirations and desires — fueled by these role models — are expected to encourage other youngsters to work harder. The creation of role models should then be a fundamental objective of reservations. (If role models do not help pull the community up, then it isn't clear that reservations can help a community at all. They will only help those who get in, but have minimal impact on the community.)

If these role models are to be created, it is important not only to get them admitted to institutes, but equally for them to graduate successfully with good grades. Only if this happens will they be able to secure good jobs and do well in them and actually become role models. This means that any reservation must admit only those who can successfully complete the programme. In an institute of higher education, the course is designed keeping in mind the global syllabus and approaches, and its level is not changed for weaker students. So, if an academically-weak student gets admitted, s/he is not likely to successfully complete the programme: the candidate will either drop out, or finally graduate with poor grades in a longer period of time and towards the bottom of the class. All this will make doing well in life much harder, if not impossible.

So, a necessary criterion for admitting candidates is their capability to successfully complete the programme. This criterion cannot and should not be violated if the quality of education has to be preserved.

In good institutes and universities, there is tough competition to get in, with only very bright students making the final cut. Here, it is possible to make allowances of a few percentage points below the general cut-off for certain categories of students. Such students can work hard and successfully complete the course of study. However, it is not possible for a candidate whose performance in the entrance criteria is substantially less than the general cut-off, to successfully complete the programme.

So, to implement any reservation, each institute should decide the handicap or advantage percentage (or equivalent) gap that can be given. This is the percentage by which the entrance criterion can be lowered without lowering the level of education. At the same time the institute can be reasonably certain that admitted students will be able to cope.

At most good institutes, admitted candidates are all within a few percentage of each other. Therefore, any advantage to candidates in a reserved category cannot be more than a few percentage points.

If this approach is used, reserved category students when they graduate are likely to be in a better position to compete with other candidates, get good jobs and become role models. At the

same time educational standards are not compromised. This approach also allows for different levels of advantage for different groups (eg, the physicallyhandicapped can be given a different advantage than the SC/ST category). In addition, the argument that 'merit is being sacrificed' due to reservations loses its pungency, as all candidates have the minimum merit to enter and complete an undiluted academic programme.

With the creation of role models we would expect an upward movement in the community, and eventually when the aspiration level of the reserved community is the same as the rest, there will be no need for reservation. This movement will happen slowly: for each generation of graduating students, the next generation will be closer to the rest of the country's youth. To reflect this situation and create pressure on the community to move closer to the rest, the advantage given for reservations should be reduced with time. Without reducing this advantage, we are effectively saying that reservations do not help the community and they remain at the same level of disadvantage even after many years. If that is the case, then the very foundation of reservations ceases to exist. One easy way to progressively reduce this advantage is to lower it by some fraction (say 0.75) every few years.

Hence, a proper approach to implementing reservations is giving a fixed maximum advantage in the admission criterion, which is at a level that does not hurt the quality of education and allows the candidate to successfully complete the programme. The advantage can then be reduced as each generation of role models comes out.

Given that reservations is a political issue and that no government will ever have the guts to remove it, this type of model, if agreed on, will free political parties from taking hard decisions. The reservation percentages can remain whatever is decided, but the advantage provided to the reserved categories gradually reduces.

This is not only a reasonable way to implement reservations; it is almost fundamental to the concept of uplifting communities through reservations in education. Without limiting the advantage given to reserved groups, reservations will have an adverse impact on the quality of higher education, which will violate the rights of these institutions of higher learning. Without progressively reducing the advantage with time, we are accepting that reservations are not having any effect.

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