

The topic of caste and caste-based reservations generates strong emotions. Recently, certain leaders of the Congress Party raised the demand that the private sector should also be forced to implement reservations in jobs for Dalits.

When we say that all human beings are equal, or should be treated equally, what is it that we mean? All of us must have enough to eat, a safe place to live, enough security and sufficient resources to think and develop intellectually, artistically and spiritually. Equal opportunity and equal rights are ways of achieving social equality and dignified conditions of living for all. There is no reason to believe that a person who can add or multiply quickly *deserves* better living conditions than a person with mental disabilities.

At present, our systems in India are skewed against the Dalits. Reservation policy tries to provide opportunities for the underrepresented so that they can eventually achieve equality. In informal talks, I hear people discuss the many failings of Dalits and all that Dalits do not do to achieve equality through merit. Rather than pointing fingers, it is more important for all of us to talk about what we can do. One has to talk about constructing systems that will allow all of us to attain equal, humane conditions.

Publicly funded institutions have an obligation to make room for a representative selection from all strata of the public. If, for example, 20 per cent of the population is Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST), then it is but fair that 20 per cent of jobs in publicly funded institutions be reserved for them. If a large number of professionals have not yet emerged from the Dalit community, then it is not due to the failing of the Dalits, but the failings of the rest of us.

Readers' Forum

Reservation has some immediate advantages. For one, it will unleash the creativity of a large number of people who would otherwise have no chance to contribute to society. Having a diverse and large number of people with a lot of creativity and training will further enhance creativity and learning.

When I had completed my 12th standard, and was hoping to apply to medical schools, the cut-off percentage in Physics, Chemistry and Biology (PCB) in the general category was 91 percent and in the reserved category was 85 percent. Five years prior to that, the cut-off percentage in PCB in the same schools in the *general* category was 85 percent. To say that reserved category students produced inferior doctors in those years because of the lowered cut-off percentage is the same as saying that the medical students five years my senior were inferior. I am not willing to say that. The reason why cut-off scores increased from 85 percent to 91 percent in the general category was because of more intense competition. The same phenomenon has been observed, not surprisingly, in the reserved category.

As a Brahmin student, I remember being very disappointed when I could not get into a medical school with my score, and I knew I could have made it through the reservation cut-off, which brings me to the heart of the problem.

If only our government got off our backs, we would be able to create opportunities for all of us. We must not act petty and blame reservations for lack of opportunities for the upper-castes. It is high time that the

real culprits, the government, be blamed. We should demand more universities, more hospitals, and more schools from our government. We must demand that the government makes it easy for private individuals and organizations to build universities, schools, and hospitals.

As of now, I am not convinced that reservation in the private sector should be implemented, since it gives the government, which has not fulfilled its own obligations towards improving representation of lower castes, the authority to harass private enterprises. However, capital, market and physical space can be reserved. One can rightfully demand that:

- 20 per cent of government subsidies and loans be set aside for Dalit-led enterprises;
- 20 per cent of government purchases be made from Dalit-led enterprises; and
- 20 per cent of corporate offices be reserved for Dalit-led enterprises, just as significant amounts of agricultural land are supposed to be reserved for Dalit-farmers.

What we need are incentives to create jobs and build enterprises rather than put some more hurdles in the way of building enterprises, or providing our government officials more reasons to extract bribes from entrepreneurs.

The elite schools and colleges, which receive public subsidies, should be expected to implement reservation. After all, the policy makers of India come from these schools and colleges.

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