

**Higher Education: In the Context of Meritocracy Vs Reservation  
(A Conceptual Analysis in Indian Scenario)**

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**Abstract**

The educational system in India has changed dramatically during the past decade in the face of globalization. The rapid expansion of the higher educational institutions, the setting up of autonomous bodies to guide standards in higher education, renewed interest in affirming the relationship between education and national growth. Today, there is nationwide debate about how education must be tailored to meet the needs of the new global economy. The students have to be trained to be productive members of a new, technologically savvy, global society. There is expansion in the student body that seeks higher education. Colleges are becoming public institutions that cater to the needs of wide range of students coming from different caste, community, gender and class backgrounds.

**Meritocracy** is a system of government or other organization wherein appointments are made and responsibilities assigned based on demonstrated talent and ability. In a meritocracy, society is being rewarded by socioeconomic status with those who show talent and competence as demonstrated by past actions or by competition. **Reservation** in Indian law is a form of affirmative action whereby a percentage of seats are reserved in the public sector units, union and state civil services, union and state government departments and in all public and private educational institutions, except in the religious/ linguistic minority educational institutions, for the socially and educationally backward communities and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who are inadequately represented in these services and institutions.

Higher education system has become the need of the day and is playing a prominent role in building and sustaining the competitive environment. In any educational institutions the quality of education should be seen as a main focus where the blend Meritocracy and Reservation for the students can be considered without compromising on the quality of education imparted and at the same time talented student is being benefited. This contributes for the individual and Socio-economic development of the country. This paper is purely a conceptual analysis focusing on Meritocracy and Reservation in Higher education to meet the emerging requirements of the competitive environment.

**Keywords:** *Meritocracy, Reservation, Higher Education, Competitive environment, Indian Education System, Socio-economic development*

**Introduction**

The works and impact of 20th century management gurus have given a new perspective on business and industry in a fast-paced global economy. They have defined “knowledge workers” will be widely accepted with continuous improvement in performance of processes, products, and services. This in turn has made the Educational institutions impossible to ignore the changing role of education in the global workplace.

Today, there is nationwide debate about the delivery of education, which must be tailored to meet the needs of the new global economy. There are many viewpoints on equipping the students to be productive members of a new, technologically-savvy, global society. The workforce of the 21st century demands greater knowledge, more complex computational, communication, teaming, and technological skills from its workers.

The educational scene in India has changed dramatically during the past decade in the face of global and other pressures. The rapid expansion of the higher educational institutions, the setting up of autonomous bodies to guide standards in higher education, renewed interest in affirming the relationship between education and national growth. There is a great expansion in the student body seeking higher education. Institutions are well equipped to cater to the needs of the students coming from a multitude of caste, community, gender and class backgrounds and need to be studied independently as the most dynamic sites of education in India.

Due to the expanding and heterogeneous student body and the academic world have become influential forces with the authority to change the direction of our contemporary education system, even though they impact the system in different ways. It is important to understand the inter-relationship (or the absence of it) between these forces in order to arrive at a concept of higher education that allows us to make meaningful interventions in this field.

### **Indian Education System:**

The Indian educational system has been imagined as a national system, where the responsibility is shared by both the institutions and the state governments. All the institutions of higher and nonprofessional education are under the purview of the central statutory body called the University Grants Commission. In response to the recommendations made by the National Policy on Education (1986), the UGC constituted the National Assessment and Accreditation Council in 1994 as an autonomous body that regulates and sets the standards for the academic evaluation of institutions.

The state governments normally list three types of colleges – government, government-aided private colleges, and self-financing or permanently unaided private colleges. Due to the changes in the world economy, the government is withdrawing from the higher education and concentrating more on primary education. This has given rise to anxiety about privatization of higher education through withdrawal of state subsidy and increased apprehensions about the capacity of the educational system to deliver social justice.

The private participation in higher education is not of recent origin in India. Up to the late 1980s most of the privately run colleges were eligible for the 'grants-in-aid' policy of the state which allowed them to provide higher education to all at subsidized rates. The concept of permanently unaided colleges came into existence in the years following the adoption of the National Policy of Education (1986) when grants-in-aid from the UGC or the state government was no more available to the newly established private colleges. This in turn has a direct impact on the unaided colleges to depend on student fees for their survival, the courses they offered and the student constituency they attracted.

The institutions of higher education are normally divided into different categories: undergraduate colleges, universities, professional education institutions, centres of research and advanced learning. With 80% of those studying in colleges for a basic degree, it is clear that institutions imparting undergraduate education need to be paid closer attention. It is important to develop new focus areas on the relationship between subjects studied and the social, cultural and the economic backgrounds of the students.

At the under graduate level reservation for the under privileged community in society needs to be concentrated when the individual economy are competing with the global economy.

At the same time to face the ever changing competitive environment, the highly qualified and talented individuals are essential. In order to achieve this, a proper balance between meritocracy and reservation policy should be designed by the government.

According to the 2011 census, it can be stated that the literacy rate is higher in urban areas as compared to rural. The female literacy rate is on the lower side (65.46) compared to male (82.14) in India and also according to the All India Survey of Higher Education census 2011, it is said that the Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education (2011) in male is seen on higher side(20.8) as compared to female (17.9) on the lower side.

### **Approving Bodies in the Education Sector**

All the universities come under the jurisdiction of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and all technical education institutions are regulated by All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). It is mandatory for all institutions to be recognized by the appropriate national level statutory bodies established by the Government of India to keep up the quality standards. Department of Higher Education of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (**MHRD**) is the highest authority in Indian Central Government, which is responsible for secondary and tertiary education system.

The University Grants Commission (**UGC**) is established by an Act of Parliament in 1956 as a statutory organization to monitor the standards of the universities and educational institutions. At the Central and State level, UGC provides grants to the qualifying universities and colleges.

The All India Council for Technical Education (**AICTE**) was set up in 1945 as an advisory body and later on in 1987 given the statutory status by an Act of Parliament. The AICTE grants approval for starting up of new technical educational institutions, new courses, and student intake capacity approval in the institutions.

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (**NAAC**) is an autonomous body, which has been established by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1994. The NAAC assess and accredit institutions of higher education universities and colleges with their respective departments and programmes. National Board of Accreditation (**NBA**) is similar to NAAC is an accreditation body, was set up in 1994 under Section 10(u) of the AICTE Act awards accreditation status to the different programmes in an institution for the time period of three to five years.

### **Meritocracy: An Overview**

**Meritocracy** is a system of a government or other organization wherein appointments are made and responsibilities assigned based on demonstrated talent and ability. The concept of 'Merit' itself is not properly understood by many. "Merit" is normally related to income and wealth. It is the combination of capacity and experience that determines "Intelligence." Since wealth is less tied to achievement than income, the amount of influence of intelligence on wealth is much less.

The most popular way of assessing merit in India is through an examination, which is not often the best way of doing it. The criteria for assessing merit is not only the measurement of actual ability, appropriateness, aptitude, but also related to the job (Skill and attitude), competency in a specific task to perform well. Many experts have opined that "intelligence," as measured by IQ tests, is partially a reflection of inherent intellectual capacity and partially a reflection of environmental influences.

Working hard is often seen as part of the merit formula. "Hard" work cannot be associated with economic success. In fact, those who work the most hours and put more effort (at least physically) are often the most poorly paid in society. Working hard is not directly related to the amount of income and wealth. But the society rewards meritocracy by wealth, position, and social status to those who show talent and competence

to achieve the desired goals. The most obvious and widely recognized non-merit barrier to achievement is discrimination. Discrimination not only suppresses merit; it is the antithesis of merit. Discrimination is in the form of Sex, Religion, Caste, Race etc., Some of these forms of discrimination are not well-recognized or generally acknowledged. Allocating quotas is a form of discrimination which is contrary to the right to equality.

A reservation is the biggest enemy of meritocracy. By offering reservation through relaxed entry criteria, which leads to moderate credentials as opposed to the promotion of merit based education system, which is the foundation of many progressive countries. Meritocracy should not be polluted by injecting relaxation of entry barriers, rather should be encouraged by offering financial aids to the underprivileged although deserving candidates only. Today the IITs and IIMs hold a high esteem in the global scenario due to their conservation of merit.

- The policy of reservation has never been subject to a widespread social or political audit. Before extending reservation to more groups, the entire policy needs to be properly examined, and its benefits over a span of nearly 60 years have to be gauged
- Providing quotas based on an accident of birth and not based on competitive merit will be discriminatory to talented students, and weaken the country's competitive edge.
- Poor people from "forward castes" do not have any social or economical advantage over rich people from backward caste.
- Combination of factors like Wealth, Income, and Occupation etc will help to identify real needy people. Most often, only the economically sound people make use of most of the seats reserved for "backward" castes, thus making the aim a total failure.

### **Reservation: An Overview**

**Reservation** is to include the social and educationally backward communities and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who are inadequately represented in the Civil services and Educational institutions, the Indian law has taken an affirmative action whereby a percentage of seats are reserved in the union and state civil services, union and state government departments, public sector units and in all public and private educational institutions, except in the religious/ linguistic minority educational institutions.

Reservations for deprived classes in higher and technical education and professions are not a favour. It is an opportunity that adds quality, creativity and efficiency in educational and professional fields. Manual labourers who comprise 70% of the workforce come with their own intelligence, imaginativeness, innovations and resourcefulness. The young students should understand the deeper economic crisis into which we all have been thrown into. The youth of this nation, who otherwise are harbingers of change and struggle in this country, must not be pitted against each other. However, the reservation debate will have to lead in the restructuring of the elitist bias in our education system and make the state take responsibility in making quality education available to all. Govt. schools must be empowered and financed with such an aim.

The Supreme Court has also ruled that reservations based on purely economic conditions are unconstitutional. In the field of education where there is reservation based on ability to pay. Reservation in Higher Education affordability for many students is not seen much, As most of the private colleges offer seats to those students who can afford to prescribe fee/cost in the name of management quota irrespective of the quality (for e.g., marks scored) of students intake. There is no scholarship or loan scheme offered by the private institution in order to encourage deprived students to go for higher education. There is more progress and efficiency than in India, where there have been a freedom and elitism in higher education and higher professions. We have to be proud of the fact that we would be a much richer nation with the participation of such brains

in our social-economic activities in such a large and varied scale. It is high time that the private institutions, industries and service sector also must be made to accept the reservation policy. These industries will have to be made aware that they operate in India, and they will have to follow the Indian Constitution and law.

A reservation is a means to increase representation of under-represented caste groups and thereby improve diversity on campus. Reservation will really help the marginalized people to lead successful lives, thus eliminating caste-based discrimination, which is still widely prevalent in India especially in the rural areas (about 60% of Indian population stays in Villages). Meritocracy is meaningless without equality. Forward people have never known to go backward due to reservations or lack of "meritocracy". Reservations have only slowed down the process of "Forward becoming richer and backward becoming poorer". In China, people are equal by birth. In Japan, everyone is highly qualified, so a qualified man finishes his work fast and comes for labour work for which one gets paid more. Therefore, instead of whining about reservation, the forward people must be at least happy with the fact that they are white-collared throughout their life.

The students and professionals from the general categories opposing reservation due to the reason of competition are not justifiable. The Governments should take initiative to help the poor and deprived students and professionals in the general category also.

### **Meritocracy VS Reservation- Opinions of personalities**

Indian companies, such as Wipro, wordlessly abide by affirmative action laws in the US but protest the same at home. "Wipro is an organisation based on meritocracy," a Wipro spokesperson said.

- Azimpremji, Chairman, Wipro opines, there is no room for job quota in the company. We compete with global companies. We are primarily in the service business. We at Wipro are an organization, which requires selection on merit (Premji 2006).
- •Rahul Bajaj, Chairman, Bajaj Autos Ltd. states that industry is prepared to do everything possible to help the socially underprivileged if it entails educating them or developing their skills. However, jobs can only be given on merit. Legislation is not the right way to provide opportunities to people. There will be a backlash from those who do not benefit from this. No private company in the US had reservations in jobs and implementing them now in India would result in loss of jobs and loss to industry (Bajaj 2006).
- Sunil Mittal, Chairman, Bharti Airtel, offers similar sentiments. Industry needs to do something about the uplift of underprivileged. However, at the same time there should not be any legislation in this regard. Government and industry should seek middle ground (Mittal 2006).
- R. Seshasayee, President of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) echoes dissenting viewpoints. To him, mandatory reservation in any form is not conducive to competitiveness of the industry. It is not acceptable (Seshasayee 2006).
- Infosys Chairman and Chief Mentor N R Narayana Murthy admitted the need for reservation in higher education based on citizens' social status; a suitable decision should be taken only after conducting a detailed study on the matter. He also said that "Please ensure that only the rich among the backward classes did not corner these benefits,"

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suggested that he favoured an expansion of scholarships for deserving students based on merit and means and also said that **"Government can and must balance the elitism of meritocracy by facilitating those at the bottom of the social pyramid to rise to the apex of an academic pyramid."**

The reservation debate will have to lead in the restructuring of the elitist bias in our education system and make the state take responsibility in making quality education available to all. To provide social justice to the underprivileged is our duty and their human right.

### **Supreme Court verdict on in house reservation- AIIMS (A case study)**

The main grouse of AIIMS students — at the forefront of the stir against 27% reservation for OBCs — is that merit is being sacrificed at the altar of vote bank politics. However, they forget two things: 25% reservation that AIIMS graduates get in PG admission and the Supreme Court judgment of 2001 that declares the earlier system of 33% reservation for them bad in law.

In fact, the Supreme Court, while stating that 33% institutional reservation is “unconstitutional”, agreed with the findings of the Delhi High Court, which had earlier set aside the reservation. The HC had found that “AIIMS students, who had secured as low as 14% or 19% or 22% in the (all-India) entrance examination got admission to PG courses while SC or ST candidates could not secure admission in their 15% or 17% quota in PG courses, in spite of having obtained marks far higher than the in-house candidates of the institute.” HC had analyzed admission data over five years.

The apex court also agreed with the HC that the “figure of 33% reservation for in-house candidates was statistically so arrived at as to secure 100% reservation for AIIMS students. There were about 40 AIIMS candidates. The PG seats being 120, 33% thereof worked out to be 40.” That meant all 40 AIIMS graduates were assured of PG seats.

The study shows that merit was clearly being sacrificed here. For instance, in the January 1996 session, an AIIMS student with 46.167% marks — lowest for an AIIMS student that year — got PG admission. However, an SC student with the same grades was admitted but denied coveted course such as obstetrics and gynaecology. The SC student got shunted to community while AIIMS students easily won berths in prestigious disciplines. Twelve AIIMS candidates were selected even though they got less marks than the SC candidate who secured 60.33% marks. Similarly, 16 AIIMS students got admission to PG courses even though they got less marks than another ST student who got 62.16%.

Basing itself on this study, SC said, “Institutional reservation is not supported by the Constitution or constitutional principles.” “A certain degree of preference for students of the same institution intended to prosecute further studies therein is permissible on grounds of convenience, suitability and familiarity with an educational environment,” it added. Preferences, the court said, had to be “reasonable and not excessive. Minimum standards cannot be so diluted as to become practically non-existent.” In the similar vein, SC said, “It cannot be forgotten that the medical graduates of AIIMS are not ‘sons of soil’. They are drawn from all over the country.”

In any educational institutions, the quality of education should be seen as a focus where the blend Meritocracy and Reservation for the students can be considered without compromising on the quality of education imparted and at the same time talented student is being benefited in turn, it contributes for the individual development and Socio-economic development of the country.

Higher education system has become the need of the day and is playing a prominent role in building and sustaining the competitive environment. Expansion in knowledge and skills is giving rise to enormous scope for educational innovations and initiatives. The educational institutions and the universities have to meet the demands of the economy and requirements of the industry with the changing employment scenario. Quality education system can contribute in building a pool of highly competitive and knowledge based human resources to sustain competition resulting in Socio-economic development of the country.

### **Issues concerned with Meritocracy and Reservations:**

Student's selection in higher education is done only through merit then automatically it can have an impact on the reservation quota, this can deprive the opportunities for the reservation candidates who have studied in rural areas with lower facilities and economically weaker background may not get an opportunity to pursue their higher education.

Students selection for pursuing higher education where importance is given to reservation then there are chances that the students with inadequate quality may face problem of coping with the meritorious students and this can lead to lack of confidence, decision making ability can decrease in a student and at the same time the institutions placement can also be effected in providing job opportunities for students and in the long run the quality of higher education may see a down trend.

In order sustain the competitive environment, a blend of meritocracy and reservation candidate can be considered, where in the case of reservation candidates the higher education institutions should come out with a unique curricula /syllabi to enhance the reservation candidate to be on par with meritorious candidates.

To make the reservation candidate suitable to meet the higher education course requirements, it is required to have a compulsory bridge course designed specifically to train the reservation candidates by the concerned institutions to match with the meritorious students before the commencement of the course. The government can play a prominent role in initiating the process of getting the reservation candidate trained to match the higher education requirements this in turn not only provides an opportunity to develop the weaker section, economically backward students but also gives scope for higher employment and increase in their competence level.

### **Conclusion**

Educational institutions in India are under tremendous pressure to fulfil both the objectives of achieving 'development' and social justice through education. It has become essential for the Institutions to coordinate and network with National and International institutions with Teachers, Researchers, Administrators and students to gain a comparative perspective about the issue.

With today's technology, the students should no longer be limited to a small number of course options. As new technology is incorporated into the everyday learning experience, the faculties can use advance and more diverse teaching methodologies and enhance the learning environment for its students.

In order to cater to the needs and requirements of the deprived students, the Educational institutions can select students based on reservation basis under which merit can be given prominence. Where equal opportunity is being given for under privileged students at the same time, the quality is also maintained in order to meet the requirements of the competitive environment.

The Government must regulate the quality of education provided by both the state-run institutions as well as private sector institutions. The government must ensure transparency in the education system in their academic and financial related activities in order to make higher education available to all.

The Government can take steps in order to overcome discrimination in the society can be reduced or eliminated through reservation on merit basis. The redistribution of greater amounts of the accumulated wealth through philanthropy in ways that would provide greater opportunity for the under privileged. The system can be designed depending socio-economic status in the society where in government resources could be allocated to provide quality education to the under privilege talented individuals. All of these measures would reduce the overall extent of inequality in society and at the same time allow individual merit to have a greater effect on economic outcomes.

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