



A solution in search of a problem

Posted at: 11/01/2019

Instead of addressing inequality, the 10% quota for economically weaker sections creates huge anxieties

- If the number of demands for implementing reforms is any guide, India's reservation system is clearly in disarray.
- However, it is unlikely that the recently passed Constitution (124th Amendment) Bill, 2019, creating a 10% quota for the economically weaker sections (EWS), will serve as anything more than a band-aid.
- Given the deep inequalities prevalent in access to education and jobs based on caste and socio-economic status, affirmative action (or positive discrimination) makes a lot of sense.
- However, the system that was put in place during the early years of the Republic deserves serious re-evaluation in an era when technology has paved the way for deploying a better equipped arsenal.

Excluding no one

- The Bill promises 10% reservation to individuals classified as economically backward.
- However, while a number of criteria were discussed in the parliamentary debate, the Bill is quite silent on this.
- Assuming that among the criteria discussed in Parliament, those that are currently applied to the definition of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) creamy layer are the ones to be used, it is not clear how useful they would be.
- Even if we apply all the other criteria for exclusion (e.g. amount of land owned and size of home), the Bill would still cover over 95% of the households.
- While the benefits of the EWS quota are likely to be minimal, the cost may be higher than one anticipates.

Getting caste certificates

- Actual implementation of the EWS quota could be challenging.
- A large number of SC/ST/OBC households report difficulties in obtaining these certificates.
- In an era when skill demands are rapidly outpacing supply of candidates in specialised fields, the EWS quota increases the constraints.
- However, there is little benefit to be derived from the EWS quota.

Redesigning reservations

- Arguably, the greatest cost of this amendment lies in the foregone opportunity to develop an enhanced and more effective reservation policy so that we can genuinely see an end to the entrenched inequalities in Indian society in the medium term.
- We have gotten so used to business as usual that we make no effort to sharpen our focus and look for more effective solutions, solutions that would make reservations redundant in 50 years.

Spread the benefits

- Hence, we must think about alternative strategies.
- One strategy may be to try and spread the benefits of reservations as widely as possible within the existing framework and ensure that individuals use their reserved category status only once in their lifetime.
- A second strategy might be to recognise that future economic growth in India is going to come from the private sector and entrepreneurship.
- In order to ensure that all Indians, regardless of caste, class and religion, are able to partake in economic growth, we must focus on basic skills.
- We have focused on admission to prestigious colleges and government jobs, but little attention is directed to social inequality in the quality of elementary schooling.
- The challenge we face is that our mindset is so driven by the reservation system that was developed in a different era that we have not had the time or the inclination to think about its success or to examine possible modifications.