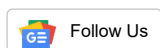


Bihar caste survey is a cynical attempt to expand reservation — India needs a different approach

Reservation is a valuable tool but India is ready for something more universal, for the simultaneous pursuit of justice, equality, excellence

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Updated: October 13, 2023 13:45 IST



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Beginning today, a fortnightly column, which will offer not this versus that but the best of both sides to inform the debate.

A good democracy doesn't weigh citizens but counts them. Everybody is equal and judged as individuals, not as a member of groups. The challenge lies in the gap between this ideal and the reality every society tries to bridge through policy. But is discrimination between applicants for jobs and education the most effective policy tool to deliver equality? Is it possible to discriminate in favour of one group without discriminating against another? It's hardly time to end reservation but expanding it — the Bihar caste survey is a cynical attempt to do so — is unfair to future generations and divisive. Radically rebooting India's infrastructure of opportunity, employment, employability and education offers a powerful policy alternative to reservation without dividing society.

Laws that make discrimination based on caste, gender, and religion illegal (which should always exist) find it hard to coexist with reservation policies that discriminate based on caste, gender and religion (which should always be temporary, if justified). An argument against reservation doesn't imply the 299 remarkable innovators who wrote our Constitution did something wrong or unnecessary by introducing reservation. They recognised that voting was only one step in creating equality and that some discrimination, though undemocratic, was temporarily necessary. I have also heard reasonable arguments that 75 years are insufficient to right centuries of historical wrongs.

As every doctor knows, the dose makes the poison. Anything powerful enough to help has the power to hurt if the dosage is too small or for too long. The many decades since Independence need us to expand our goals to pursue equality and excellence. Equality without excellence is neither sustainable nor satisfying. Pursuing both means a new definition of equality. That means equal treatment, unbiased competition and impartially judged outcomes, not equal outcomes achieved by unequal treatment, biased competition and preferential judging. This pursuit needs to shift from discriminating between children based on their parents to creating the infrastructure of opportunity that allows the pursuit of excellence and judging them on the sweat of their brow and the courage in their heart.

Rebooting our infrastructure of opportunity requires accelerating reforms to our 3Es of education, employability, and employment. But I suggest three low-hanging fruits. In education, state governments must fix government schools without wasting more energy on small class sizes,

teacher qualifications or teacher salaries but focusing on the binding constraints of performance management (fear of falling and hope of rising), governance (allocation of decision rights), and soft skills.

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In employability, we must attract massive new financing for skills from employers by redesigning the system around the five design principles of learning by doing, learning while earning, learning with qualification modularity, learning with multimodal delivery, and learning with signalling value. This requires ending regulatory cholesterol that restricts linking degrees to apprenticeships, confuses apprenticeships with jobs, judges vocational universities like traditional ones and blunts online higher education growth.

In employment, massive non-farm, high-wage, formal job creation requires cutting the regulatory cholesterol for employers that breeds litigation, compliance, filings and criminalisation by passing new labour codes. There is a lot of work in manufacturing, less anchored to large employers with offices, and mostly without index-linked, defined benefit pensions. But our current labour laws hate small employers, breed corruption, and encourage substituting people with machines.

Many academics position jobs and skills as a chicken-and-egg problem: Do jobs breed skills? Or do skills attract jobs? It's a bit of both. But from a practitioner's perspective, the best way to solve such a problem is to become vegetarian, that is, do something different. State governments must pursue fiscal discipline, macroeconomic stability, good urbanisation, lower self-exploitation in self-employment, with only 10 per cent of their labour working in farms.

A modern state is a welfare state and being a good ancestor requires a government that uses society's resources to subsidise and deliver quality food, education, healthcare and housing to those who need it. But this safety net should not become a hammock: Unemployed workers cannot get the same income as those working because people get much more from work than income. And rich people should not get cheap food, gas or diesel. Policy must accelerate the [Aadhaar](#)-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer revolution for subsidies. This digital and financial plumbing must combine with a new HR regime for 25 million civil servants because the effective and efficient delivery of public services also matters greatly for equality.

Gandhiji believed that Sarvodaya (development of all) would be accomplished through Antyodaya (welfare of the weak). Philosophers have built on his thinking and concluded that if you were designing the world without knowing your place in it, you would ensure fairness for all.

Reservation is a valuable tool for social justice but after years of Poorna Swaraj, it's time to discard something often subject to political manipulation for something more universal over the next few decades. India is ready for the simultaneous pursuit of justice, equality, excellence. Indians should create a glide path to reach 100 years of Independence with 100 per cent reservation for 100 per cent of its people.

The writer is co-founder of Teamlease Services