

Faculty Reservations in India – in conversation with Dr. Amman Madan (Azim Premji University), Dr. Amit Thorat (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and Dr. Ashwini Deshpande (Delhi School of Economics).

1) The UGC proposal is argued to be a step towards meritocracy in faculty selection; how much of weight do you think that argument holds? At the same time, it is criticised on the grounds of reducing representation within the faculty body. Your thoughts on the same.

Dr. Madan:

I am not able to understand how it will either reduce or increase the meritocracy. All it will do is ensure that reserved positions are spread across different departments over the long run. It will not make any impact on the reservation policy as such.

Of course, the notion that meritocracy rests upon individual ability alone is flawed. Hence to believe that reservations necessarily reduce the meritocracy is not correct. They may or may not, depending upon how they are implemented. Merit is a complicated concept and is affected by many social processes. A person's social background may make an enormous contribution to that person's merit. A person's ability and achievement should not be assessed without examining the obstacles that person may have had to overcome to reach where she is presently standing. Properly implemented reservations will create a better meritocracy than one where people with social advantages are further rewarded while excluding those who have had a history of previous social oppression and disadvantage.

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Smaller departments of say three people are likely to have vacancies coming up less frequently than bigger departments of say thirty people. This new policy will therefore slow down the recruitment against reserved seats in the short run. On the other hand, it will ensure that reserved positions do not cluster in just one department. In the long run it will ensure an even distribution of reservations across departments. It will ensure that the present anomaly of reserved seat faculty in some departments but not others is overcome. It will be better in the long run. Speaking of only the narrow caste-based reservations that we have, this is how the reservations should have been implemented right from the beginning. But it is never too late to correct things.

Dr. Thorat:

For a long time, there has been the argument that when you have candidates that either join universities or public sector employment on reserved quotas they are somehow less meritocratic than other people. This argument is used, to claim that reserved category individuals are genetically not meant to be as good as the upper castes, which itself is reinforcing the caste system. This is a false argument; why do we have reservation in the first place? People look at it as a way to hide less than eligible or qualified people in the system. It is always very possible that you have very deserving qualified people from the reserved categories. However, why do we not find their share in jobs? This is because of actual, covert or overt bias of people who are selecting. Being human beings who have preferences and biases against people who are different from them, even if you have a pool of well qualified people there is a tendency to select people who are similar to them.

You are not genetically predisposed to be smarter than people. Merit is a cultural and nurturing phenomenon and is largely attributed to the environment. Belief that you can do it and a sense of confidence provided by the environment leads to an outwardly display of what we call 'merit'. The main purpose of the reservation system is not to give them representation but to ensure that they are not *excluded* by people who are hiring.

Belief that you can do it and a sense of confidence provided by the environment leads to an outwardly display of what we call 'merit'. This is a matter of being deprived of a right to education for thousands of years, and so among the privileged accumulated cultural capital effect is bound to manifest itself in the ability to speak English fluently and carry yourself confidently.

The now reserved categories were denied equal opportunities, not because they weren't good enough but because it was believed that God made them differently. There is a huge history of cultural capital at the expense of others - so is giving reserved categories a bit of leeway not just and fair?

Dr. Deshpande:

I don't agree (and there is no evidence) that affirmative action lowers "merit". So any change that lowers the extent of affirmative action need not at all increase the "meritorious" component. I am using the word merit in quotation marks, as the assumption that all candidates in the non-reserved category are inherently more "meritorious" than those in the reserved category is fallacious.

At the same time, it is criticised on the grounds of reducing representation within the faculty body. Your thoughts on the same.

Yes, absolutely. If this proposal were to go through, it would lead to a decline in the number of reserved positions.

2) Studies link diversity within faculty representation with student's educational achievement; in your experience how do you see it influencing learning outcomes?

Dr. Madan:

While one should be careful to note that student learning is not affected by only thing like faculty diversity, yes, it does have an impact. Again and again one hears from students that they found great encouragement and inspiration from teachers who shared their identity or had the same cultural background. Women students find women faculty inspiring, too. Teachers who share students' experiences are able to give more appropriate examples and are able to raise more relevant issues. Research is also influenced by social location. At the same time, we must acknowledge that good teaching and research are abilities which can be nurtured in anyone and cannot be completely reduced to one's social location.

Dr. Thorat:

When there are teachers from a particular region or community e.g. teachers from Bengal or Tamil Nadu, and students from the same region, there's obviously affinity among them, there is similar cultural background and they go out of their way to help. Imagine tribes or adivasis coming from North East, or Dalits or Muslims and you there is nobody within the faculty from the community/region, and the existing faculty is also not warming up to you as they do with students from their own background. As a result, these students don't get the kind of encouragement, attention and mentorship that they should get. Diversity is extremely important, therefore teachers' from different communities will ensure a sense of comfort and confidence while also serving as role models for the students. It is known all over the world that when people come from different backgrounds they bring their own sensibilities, sensitivities and perspectives. Representation is very important because education is not just about mugging up something and making sense of it's about putting it into a context and situating it into a culture and that is essential in any education institute.

Dr. Deshpande:

Since inherent merit is not concentrated in any one or group of castes, greater representation from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented only has the potential to increase overall merit and not reduce it. Think of a hypothetical scenario of a university where most teachers are male, because (due to historical and discriminatory social structures), fewer women make it to the "general" list. Now, in this situation, suppose there is affirmative action for women, and that increases the proportion of women in the faculty. Would that a) not increase the overall merit and impart to the students a more well-rounded education? and b) would that not inspire younger women to pursue higher education, since they now have a chance to apply for jobs in the teaching profession?

3) Presently, how diverse do you consider the faculty representation at public universities to be? How do you see it being affected by this proposal, if it goes through?

Dr. Madan:

Faculty representation at public or even private universities is markedly homogeneous. Even with reservations we see mainly faculty of a certain social background - the children of urban, English educated families predominate. This is only a small section of our society. The presence or absence of the present proposal will make only a very small difference. We should not get too obsessed with reservations. The real problem and bottlenecks lie elsewhere. We are not improving the schools available to the poor and marginalized. Indeed, the decline of government schools is leading to greater inequalities and a sharper difference between those with more and less advantages. We need to drastically improve the quality of schools and colleges which are available to the poor and socially marginalized. We need to drastically increase the cultural and economic resources available to them. We also need a more comprehensive measure of inequality than caste alone. There is now plenty of evidence available to show that educational inequality is influenced by class, region, gender and several other factors along with caste. In the absence of action along these multiple lines, I do not see the present notification as being very significant.

Dr. Thorat:

Just to look at the present situation, given the constitutionally mandated reservation quotas within faculty if you look at it for 2016-17 only 32% of all teachers working as assistant professors were from the reserved category where reservation is mandated for 50 % (49.7 to be exact).

The way the 13 point roster has been created is itself flawed; every 4th, 8th and 12th seat is reserved for OBC candidates and only every 7th and 14th seat for ST candidates. If you want 50% reservation, then every second seat would have to be reserved, further many departments don't even have 14 positions thus eliminating the chance for reservation. The formula for calculating itself is flawed, then applying it to departmental level - is an attempt to bypass the constitutional mandate. Till the problem of caste, religion or gender identity persists, it is incumbent for the government to continue providing affirmative action mechanisms.

The state of primary education is very poor in this country and there have been demands for a larger share of the budget for education but no political party wants to do it and you can question why.

It's not an either / or question, if you invest in private education, everyone will be good enough and at the same level and then reservation won't be needed. Even if everyone got great public sector education, and everyone is at the same level playing field, you would still need reservation.

You must understand that discrimination is based on identity. You will get hired or get admission because you're from a particular caste, not because you are not good enough. Reservation is to counter the bias, prejudice and the bigotry that exists in the society by people who are already elite and educated and in positions of power who select people to colleges or jobs and can pick and choose people.

Dr. Deshpande: There is some caste diversity due to the fact that reservations for SC-STs have been around for several decades. However, for faculty positions, they are not fully implemented (i.e. several reserved seats remain vacant), especially at higher levels. Thus, there is scope to increase the representation of Dalit and Adivasi teachers.

4) How can we strike a balance between recruiting effective, high quality teachers whatever their demographic characteristics, whilst at the same time recognising the need to make teaching a more inclusive profession?

Dr. Madan:

There are at least two dimensions which we need to pay attention to if we wish to strike a balance. The first is to acknowledge that unless we improve the overall school and college system, the less affluent and the socially disadvantaged would not be able to get a good education and thereby quality to good teachers. Without that improvement only a small portion of India's population will still appear to have the qualities which mark good faculty. Those qualities are also contentious but let us leave that for the time being. We have to increase the number of people from different social backgrounds who can be recruited as good faculty. Right now we are not making enough efforts for that. Only when the numbers of people coming from remote areas, from lower classes and castes who manage to get a good education increase can we begin to really find a good balance.

Secondly, we need to acknowledge that nobody is born a good teacher. People grow and for that institutions must invest in them. Unfortunately, nowadays there is little in-house support given for the growth of either faculty or students who are taken in through reservations. They are just taken in and then the institution kind of ignores them. We need to build elaborate mechanisms of cultivation and growth. Then we will be able to find both the faculty and students taken through reservations blooming and doing much better. This needs a commitment from the institution to help them to move up.

Dr. Thorat:

Who are the 'we'? Who is going to strike a balance? The government? Society? Or us as whole? The balance will only come in jobs, education etc., when society itself balances itself as a whole. But do we wait for society to change and become casteless? We need to provide solutions right now to the people who are suffering. We know that bias exists, and people on interview panels are selecting people in a biased and bigoted manner. People are protesting against this, which means there is a problem.

I see the balance coming very far away in the future, right now we must tackle the very overt and deep-seated prejudice. We have been independent only for 70 years, that's about a generation and a half, and there's baggage of about 1000 of years of exclusion, which I don't think can be changed in 100 years. Don't expect things to change overnight, we're dealing with thousands of years of caste and community based culture. India is an elephant, and it's going to take time. It is up to people to understand why there are problems in India- it's because of our history and why we are a product of our history. The problem is that people don't have context we're so impatient.

Dr. Deshpande:

Recruiting effective and high quality teachers is a major challenge for higher education in India, and we have to think of ways of overcoming this challenge. However, this challenge is unrelated to the reservation system, despite myths to the contrary. The problem starts much earlier, i.e. in the quality of education at lower levels, which is highly uneven. Barring a few pockets of excellence, the overall quality of instruction in schools and colleges remains poor, and the method of education which emphasizes rote learning geared towards a single examination is not conducive to creative and innovative thinking. Not to mention the extremely poor infrastructure that characterizes most educational institutions at all levels. Thus, we produce a mass of graduates who are not equipped to teach, and/or are not interested. The best brains often look to leave the country for greener pastures abroad where they find greater potential for their inherent abilities to thrive.

This requires a major and creative overhaul of the education system. While that is a long term agenda (which needs an approach that prioritizes education -- India spends a minuscule proportion of its budget on education and health compared even to other developing countries), reservations ensure that the composition of the teaching body roughly mirrors the underlying composition of the population. That is a big plus and must be maintained.