

Quota versus merit

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FOLLOWING the publication of the preliminary test results of the 34th Bangladesh Civil Service examination the quota versus merit based placement issue has come to the forefront of public debate. While some argue in favour of quotas, a large section demands the abolition of the privilege paving the way for a merit based competitive qualifier.

Nevertheless, the issue is not that straightforward. Reservation quotas, also known as affirmative action, have generated much anxiety around the world. At the same time, it has also eased social tensions and economic problems, bridging the gap between the elites and the underprivileged to some extent. In the United States till 1970s it was thought that the African-Americans were inefficient and ineffective. However, with the state's affirmative action this underprivileged section has caught up with the country's white coloured people to large extent. Although collective backwardness is still there, from Bill Cosby to Barack Obama, individual success stories of the African-Americans are literally incalculable.

In South Asia no country has probably experienced more social tensions over the issue of merit versus reservations than India. Dr Ambedkar, the key architect of reservation policy in the independent India, raised his voice in the parliament in 1927 to address the extreme economic and social backwardness of the Dalits (untouchables), originated in the Hindu social order. The caste system existed in Hindu religion since 1500 BC to 1950 AD when it was abolished in the Indian constitution.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, advocated affirmative action to overcome the country's social and economic disparities. In 1990 India's higher education institutions, public sector units and government bodies kept 22.5 percent of available seats reserved for scheduled caste and scheduled tribes which was raised to 49.5 percent in 2008 by including reservation for other backward category. An Economist report shows that the various quotas in India have partly achieved their most basic objectives. In public jobs, for example, members of backward groups Dalits constituted only 1.6 percent of the most senior civil servant positions in 1965 that rose to 11.5 percent by 2011. Dalits represent about 16 percent of India's population.

The report also cited a study of 16 of India's biggest states looking at the effect on poverty in backward groups of their access to quotas of representatives. It was observed that for 'scheduled tribes', greater political clout has led to a small drop in poverty. However, for the 'scheduled castes' it has made absolutely no difference at all.

Singapore and Malaysia is a classic case as far as meritocracy versus reservation policies is concerned. Amid racial tensions and ideological conflicts Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965. It was widely believed that the new born country could not survive on its own, due to scarcity of land, water, markets and natural resources. However, in less than four decades Singapore has transformed itself from a third world to a first world country. Meritocracy has been one of the guiding principles of the city state which ensures that the best and brightest, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background, find a level playing field to develop their fullest potential.

On the other hand, Malaysia's affirmative action programmes, also known as the Bumiputera policy, that favoured its local Malay community is generally identified as the reason behind the country's failure to overcome the middle-income country trap. While the global experience on the merit versus quota based development discourse is at best mixed, there is a tendency for countries to move from an affirmative action to a meritocratic system with their economic and social progress. In the case of Bangladesh, only 44 percent of job-seekers can compete for civil service jobs through their merits. 56 percent of positions are reserved for various quotas- the children of freedom fighter (30 percent), female (10 percent), districts (10 percent), tribal (5 percent), and physically challenged (1 percent). The country's some of the best civil servants have studied the existing quota system for civil service recruitment. A study by Dr Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad (Khan and Ahmad Study) observed that 'recruitment of only 45 percent candidates based on merit is unconstitutional.' They also opined that 'there is no legal basis of quota for the freedom fighters. This quota will be logical if it is proved that the freedom fighters are backward among the citizens. The Khan and Ahmad study suggests that the legal basis of quotas for freedom fighters' children is weaker.' Nevertheless, recommendations made by the study have ignored by the government. The flaw of the quota system is also reflected in public service commission's inability to fill up the reserved posts owing to lack of enough candidates who could qualify the four layers of recruitment process. At the same time we see a large number of highly qualified applicants could not enter the public service constrained by quotas. Thus, it is a high time to reform the quota system looking at internal realities as well as external experience. Unlike India, Bangladesh's key advantage is the country's poverty and social backwardness are more of a regional concern than that of race or religion. Bangladesh is largely a homogenous society.

The most disadvantaged section of the society, particularly indigenous people constitute only 1.1 percent of the country's population but they enjoy 5 percent quota in the public service. The freedom fighters' children quota is probably the greatest constraints to give room to a large number of meritorious applicants as it absorbs 30 percent of all the available seats constituting a small share of the population. Similarly, according to some experts, the district quota should also be downsized. The growing discontents among the large section of applicants over quota system are happening at a time when Bangladesh's demographic window opens with more young population are crowding in the job markets. However, given the country's governance constraints and institutional bottlenecks the economy's job creation rate is consistently falling behind its workforce growth leading to youth unemployment and loss of national output.

The rise of market based economy does not undermine the role of public sector. It rather demands a competent bureaucracy and an efficient state in managing the market. While affirmative action has probably served the nation's interest in the past, the system now demands drastic reforms accommodating more meritorious candidates in the public service. The government must recognize this problem and take the necessary steps downsizing as well as phasing out some quotas in a time bound manner. Such reform could be a big leap forward towards a meritocratic society.

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