

Thinking beyond quotas

The Gujjars in Rajasthan, the Jats in Haryana and the Patels in Gujarat have shown that politically powerful communities nurturing a sense of victimhood can mount a powerful challenge to the Indian state. One of India's foremost political commentators, Rajni Kothari, had once agonised over this, expressing his concern at "our incapacity and our growing powerlessness before vested interests that have acted in concert to take the system in completely different directions".

With half, and in some instances more, of all educational and job opportunities in the public sector going to candidates coming under the reserved category, there is some resonance to Hardik Patel's demand made in 2015 to "either free the country from reservations or make everybody the slave of reservations". This is a widely shared feeling across the country by communities feeling marginalised because of a policy of reservation which was once limited, focussed as well as necessary but is now spiralling out of control.

What the young are looking for today is not more of the same — admissions to courses that lead to nowhere and low-entry jobs in the government. By empowering them with skills the world needs today and tomorrow, the government will be building the country's human capital far more quickly than any more reservations ever can.

There is a lot of ground to be covered. The vocational training schemes in the country are inadequate and woefully behind the times with many addressing yesterday's needs. There are some good schemes like those offered by the Nettur Technical Training Foundation (NTTF) in Bengaluru but they are simply too few.

Technical training is also constrained by a small educational base — 70% of India's workforce is without tertiary education — and a crippling lack of well-qualified trainers. Does it then come as a surprise that India, despite its young workforce, has never been able to challenge China in manufacturing? This needs to be acknowledged upfront as a major national catastrophe and tackled as such.

We have lost more than a decade in not complementing a mass welfare scheme like the the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) with a bigger programme to train the young for employment. One outcome of such neglect is that there is a clamour for more reservations that is bringing India to its knees, often with devastating effects. The sooner our politicians acknowledge address this, the better it will be for India.

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