

## OPINION: QUOTA POLITICS IS THE LEGACY OF FLAWED PRIORITIES

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

Last Monday, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) announced its decision to expand India's affirmative action agenda. It proposed an additional quota of 10% reservation for the economically weaker sections falling in the general category of the population for government jobs and admission to education institutions, both in public and private.

A few days later, not only did the proposal get converted into a legislative proposal, which entailed an amendment of Article 15 and 16 of the Constitution of India, a rare political consensus, motivated clearly by the impending general elections, ensured that it was voted into a law; the President of India signed off on the bill on Saturday. Interestingly, even before the President's nod, the legislation has been challenged in the Supreme Court, which, in a previous ruling, had capped quotas at 50%. At present, the affirmative action defined around centuries of social discrimination is restricted to Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Regardless of how the apex court deals with the legal challenge, the events of last week beget a larger question: Why do people see quotas as the only means to realise their aspirations. Ironically, this vexing question comes our way in what is the 70th year of India's independence; and the equally uncomfortable answer is that it is the outcome of a collective failure in ignoring adequate investment in education and health. Ask yourself, when did you last see an agitation for better education and healthcare, unlike, say, the recent wave of protests over quotas; and when did politicians target each other for this failure, as opposed to levelling allegations about infractions in public office. This erosion of human capital is what has compounded the problem of jobless growth and, worse, created the deep social fault lines in the Indian society.

The consequences of this neglect was summed up eloquently by Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen in an interview published in *Mint* on 7 January. "There are poor people in China. But you don't have the kind of difficulty that you have in India where a poor person doesn't have a school to go to, doesn't have a hospital where he can take his child to, which will provide basic diagnostic and healthcare," he said, before adding: "The main thing is India has never tried (over the last 70 years) to develop on a solid footing either primary healthcare or primary education. In the absence of that, you cannot make anything else stand."

The erudite professor is spot on. It is a monumental neglect that has been in place since the creation of modern India. In contrast, China, unleashed a public policy, which invested heavily in human capital—which, as we see today, has contributed to it becoming the second largest economy in the world. Forget China, India's spending on health and education barely stack up against our less well-off South Asian neighbours—and this is seven decades after independence, so we have no one to blame. According to the latest estimates, as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP), India's spending on health was 1.4%, while it was 2.5% for Bhutan, 1.6% for Sri Lanka, 1.1% for Nepal and 1% for Bangladesh. Similarly, public investment on education as a proportion of GDP was 2.7% for India compared to 7.4% for Bhutan, 3.4% for Sri Lanka and 2.5% for Bangladesh.

So then, are we surprised that most of those 10 million people joining the work force every year

are not adequately equipped to join a formal job? As a result, most are consigned to the burgeoning informal sector made up of underpaid new economy jobs such as delivery personnel. Further, given the rapid shift in the disease burden to non-communicable diseases, most Indians, thanks to the inadequate health infrastructure, are just a disease away from embracing poverty. Logically then, quotas become the palliative—unfortunately hardly a sustainable solution—and also the electoral currency on the eve of elections.

But everything can't be about politics. It is as Professor Sen, quoting Adam Smith, said, ultimately, economic expansion is dependent on the quality of human ability.

And this is non-negotiable.

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