

Reservation in the private sector is not the answer to caste-based discrimination

One of the most shameful realities of life in India today is caste-based discrimination. Affirmative action, in the form of reservations for marginalised castes, has existed since independence in government institutions. It was intended to give people a leg up, not be an entitlement that they and theirs could enjoy in perpetuity. And it was certainly not intended as an election sop to be handed out to affluent communities. Nitish Kumar's proposal for reservation in the private sector has once again revived the debate of whether reservation is a good idea at all. There can be no disagreement with the fact that caste-based discrimination is prevalent in India. The fact that inter-caste marriages are still seen as worthy of comment, the spate of killings of Dalits in many states in India, and the visible lack of members of the marginalised communities in positions of authority clearly indicate that there is a problem.

Seventy years after independence, despite reservations of all hues, this scenario has not improved drastically. This suggests that the problem needs different solutions. Simply extending the existing framework to the private sector cannot be that solution. The problem of discrimination is not something that arises only at the level of employment or higher education. The problem is endemic and must be addressed at the grassroots. Ensuring that students of marginalised communities are provided the requisite education at the primary and secondary levels – at par with their upper caste colleagues – is one of the most effective means of eliminating discrimination. Given that many schools in rural India have been known to make Dalit children sit separately even at the government-mandated mid-day meal; it is clear that this problem is deep rooted.

To transfer the burden of a failed system to the private sector, with its pressures of profit-making, bottom-lines and competition is unfair. The best way to ensure that companies hire people from all communities, genders, and backgrounds is to make sure that people of all classes, genders and castes acquire the skills needed to be competitive. A problem bigger than caste is poverty; and ensuring that debilitating poverty does not get in the way of education is the responsibility of the government. This will need a large commitment – both financially and socially – in the education sector. Improving the state of our rural schools, and the universal education programme, and ensuring that teachers are trained and meet quality criteria, are some of the crucial steps needed to make not merely the educational standards of the country better, but also in creating awareness and fighting ills such as caste, religion and gender-based discrimination.

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