Modernity and Meritocracy
Searching for a Fourth Way

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The vision of a meritocracy is integral to modernity, resting upon principles of achievement, individualism, and the primacy of academic knowledge. Each of these is now debated, particularly the claim of individual contributions to merit. Among the four responses that are possible, a multifactor approach to social inequality in selection, social interventions, and institutional, academic support may actually be truest to modernity's promise of freedom and fairness.

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The debate over reservations seems to be a never-ending one. Perhaps, it raises so much dust and fury because it touches upon some fundamental questions of our time. My view, in a nutshell, is that reservations have helped but are really not very important; much more needs to be done. This merits some elaboration.

Before today's reservations made their appearance, the world was still full of reservations of another kind. Kings chose their courtiers from those they trusted. So this usually meant reservations for networks of kinship and community. Who became rich and powerful was influenced a great deal by the family into which one was born. Whether it was the Mughal empire or the Marathas, they appointed their officials by choosing from networks of caste, kinship, and community. We love to vilify the British, but we must also acknowledge that it was through them that an idea of West European modernity—that organisations should recruit through open tests and that selection should be only on the basis of merit—began to inform Indian institutional practices.

Late medieval Europe, too, had preferred to appoint people of "high" birth to powerful positions. Modernity and the enlightenment helped to shatter this custom, in no small way by capitalism's churning of the social landscape. The French Revolution's slogan of "Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity" spoke for a new world view in which everyone shared a common human nature and it was wrong to think that the nobility had blood that made them somehow superior and deserving of special privileges. This world view resonated with the way many Indian bhakts and Sufis thought; they believed everyone had the same *atma*, which was part of an eternal *paramatma*. Here, too, it was said that it was karma that mattered and not *janma*.

In 19th-century West Europe, however, this Advaitic egalitarianism descended from the spiritual realm and found expression in institutional practices. Even though the French Revolution soon spiralled into an orgy of blood, when Napoleon seized power to declare himself emperor of the new French republic, he also set up for the first time in history a series of national universities to which admissions took place through open entrance examinations. While the Chinese state bureaucracy had had open entrance exams for several centuries, the French national universities led to the establishment of this method as the formal mechanism of selection for an entire education system. These universities were said to lead to a career based on talent, not on blood and birth.

Ideas Underlying Meritocracy

The idea of making merit the basis of appointments grew rapidly in the 19th century. It meant that more and more the selection of people was based on their academic knowledge, which was tested through various kinds of examinations. It came to India in a dramatic way when the Indian Civil Service changed its recruitment model from patronage by the directors of the East India Company to selection through an entrance test. G O Trevelyan wrote in 1864 of the "competition wallahs" who came to India

after studying Greek and Latin. It was possible to have amongst them students of humble backgrounds who by doing well in their school and university education came to rub shoulders with the most senior British officials and with Indian rajas.

Meritocracy, as this came to be known, rested upon certain ideas. The first was that achievement and ability should be the basis of choosing people for high posts. The elite should not become so because of whom they were related to, but because of their own hard work and perspicacity. This was a much better way of setting up a group of high officials than by selecting them primarily on the basis of their loyalty. It also made available a much larger pool of talent than from just those who happened to be born to privilege.

This was connected to a second idea, individualism, which viewed individuals as masters of their own will and with the capacity to overcome social pressures. Individualism as a social principle for building organisations meant that the social origins of individuals were not to be looked into; their personal attributes and merit were only what mattered.

A third idea was about what features constituted merit. When a person's qualities were to be examined, what exactly did one look for? The growing power of universities and university-educated people led this to increasingly mean that academic or university knowledge was the sign of ability. This had the advantage of being spelt out clearly and there being the availability of established methods of testing it. The way knowledge was interpreted in academic institutions became the hallmark of merit. So, expertise in school knowledge, and particularly the way examinations were able to identify valued traits, began to define merit.

The overall effect of meritocratic ideas and practices was indeed a liberating one for those times. It helped overcome the shackles of hereditary privilege and gave expression to the ideals of equality and freedom. We were not tied to our history, but as individuals we could be whatever we wanted to be. Such ideas were the basis of principles of democracy, liberalism and, in a way, socialism as well. They were connected to the growth of the nation state, whose citizens were all considered equal. The setting up of a meritocracy provided a process for implementing that equality and for selecting from amongst the citizenry.

The difficulties in this early modern vision of meritocracy are now well known. To begin with, its understanding of individual merit rested upon a denial of the relevance of only some social identities that were well-known and explicit. There was no recognition of many other social processes that held people back and suppressed the free expression of talent but were not very clearly visible. Some families or communities might be early entrants to education and their children stand upon the advantages of their parents to tower over the rest. The first generation to enter universities finds them markedly more daunting and difficult than third- or fourth-generation university students. When schools teach in an indifferent manner, it is the child who has parents teaching him maths at home that does well in class. Older privileges could carry on subverting the ideal of meritocracy without carrying the flags of older identities. Reversing this situation meant thinking about meritocracy in a different way.

The notion that merit is created by individual effort and hence is an individual attribute is only partially true. Indeed, hard work and motivation do matter. But so do family environment, caste, economic resources, living in a place where good quality schools are available, and so on. A female student who is born into a landless labourer's family in a remote village has to work much harder to be at the same level as a male student from a family of professionals living in a metropolis. That we still find some such star students should not blind us to the fact that they are rare exceptions and that the trend is actually the reverse.

Consider as an illustration the percentage of young people in different age groups who are enrolled in schools and colleges as revealed by National Sample Survey (NSS) data (Table 1). This example views them from the framework of caste, but comparable patterns can also be seen for regional differences, occupational and income differences, gender, and so on. The many years of effort by state and central governments to equalise primary school enrolment between the Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Others have paid off. By 2011–12, there was only a slight difference in the enrolment of 6–14 year olds amongst them. However, when one moves to secondary and tertiary education, the Others are much better off, with about 36% of their 18–21 year olds in college. It is possible that the Others from metropolises may be doing much better than the Others from educationally backward regions. However, the difference between them and the other caste groups is stark. Only half as many 18–21 year olds from the STs and SCs as from the Others are going to any kind of college. The differences may actually be much starker than these figures reveal since there exist sharp gradients in the quality of colleges, from elite colleges to colleges with two rooms and no regular schedule of teaching. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that the SCs, STs, and OBCs are disproportionately present in colleges of the lowest quality.

Table 1: Caste-wise Enrolment among Different Age Groups (%)

Enrolment	ST	SC	OBC	Others (General)	Overall
School enrolment, 6–14 year olds	91.2	91.9	92.7	94.8	92.9
School enrolment, 15–17 year olds	67.9	67.4	74.9	80.1	74.2
Tertiary education enrolment, 18–21 year olds	14.2	18.8	25.2	36.6	26.2

Source: Calculated by the author from NSS data, 68th round.

While it is possible that the caste system as a whole may have weakened, there continue to exist many social inequalities which hinder the expression of talent and hard work. The continuations of caste, class inequality, regional differences in school systems, gender, languages of power, and so on, all contaminate the enlightenment ideal of the individual freely striving for perfection. The ability to access and then perform within academic institutions is a mix of both the individual and the social. The impact of social differences can be minimised only when there are counterbalancing forces which act to erase their effects. The dream of modernity that it would erase the violence of social structures that oppress the individual remains unfulfilled.

Among the sites of unfair discrimination may be the curricula and pedagogy in

educational institutions. One does not wish to make a sweeping statement condemning all academic knowledge. It may be alleged by some that academic institutions only teach arbitrary knowledges of elite groups. This is as incorrect a generalisation as saying that everything said and taught outside universities is valid knowledge just because it belongs to the marginalised. We should not resort to such an extreme sociological determinism. At the same time, it may be worth asking whether everything that is taught in academic institutions is equally important and to be desired. It can be asked, for instance, whether too much of an emphasis on book learning is a good thing.

The near absence of lived and embodied knowledge in school and university learning is not only discriminatory against those who bring such resources to the site of education, but also harmful to all students of any social origin. The excessive focus on book learning may be convenient for teachers who have little practical experience, but it also has the consequence of creating false hierarchies of knowledge. Those who have the ability to deal with books and lectures do better but those, for instance, who have greater felicity with social interaction or working with spanners and hammers do not find these knowledges of much value in the classroom. To the extent that the latter are worth having in the curricula, their absence acts as an unfair discrimination. To the extent that book knowledge is truly valuable, that, of course, has nothing unfair about it.

However, we have now begun to realise that a substantial part of the content of education may be shaped by the convenience of the social groups that dominate it rather than the aptness of that content for the purposes of education. The use of English as the medium of instruction in elite institutions is a classic example of the dilemmas this poses. Its usefulness is merely because it is the language of dominant groups, not because of its intrinsic qualities as a language.

Responses to Modernity's Difficulties

Therefore, we may be missing something when we think about meritocracy in a purely individualistic manner. The deeply social character of merit compels us to ask difficult questions of this. I do not reject the striving of modernity to free us from all that ties us down. Instead of rejecting this ideal of emancipation, perhaps, a more sophisticated understanding of our link with our social context is called for. Freedom does indeed mean that individuals should be able to create unhindered their own selves and lives. And, yet, we need to integrate this with a more realistic vision of humans as inevitably social beings, with specific histories and locations. This is a challenge to the way we think many deeper civilisational principles. It is the challenge of a communitarian reworking and not a rejection of the project of modernity. For some, this means turning away from modernity and a return, for example, to feudal or even hunting–gathering modes of thought. Since I despair of the viability of those, perhaps it is a new modernity we must instead seek, which is able to provide fairness and freedom along an acknowledgement of our history and social location, not a simple denial of it. The direction of struggle may be towards rethinking meritocracy and not rejecting it.

Modernity's difficulties in dealing with collectivities and collective forms of social and educational disadvantage have invited several kinds of responses. Some have rejected both modernity and egalitarianism, as can be seen when people reject the idea of equality and insist that the old elites are by their very nature superior and should be institutionally accepted as such. A second kind of response has been from those who are committed to egalitarianism and modernity and believe that acknowledging social differences will distort institutional processes. The impact of communities and social contexts is something to be resisted and not acknowledged. The rewarding of achievement is an important aspect of building institutions and any messing with this can distort the signals that build institutional life. Just as selecting and promoting *chamchas* should be shunned, so should be the selection of individuals for any reason other than their own achievements.

Reservations on caste grounds are a third way of combining a recognition of social disadvantage along with modernity. Both the aforementioned approaches have deep objections to reservations, but for different reasons. That they may sometimes borrow each other's reasons should not mask their distinct origins and sharply conflicting nature. Both, however, feel uncomfortable with the results of reservations and are unhappy with the presence of students selected on the basis of reservations in their institutions. The impact of reservations is a surprisingly under-researched area in India. Perhaps, our respective positions are so strongly held that looking for evidence seems superfluous. And, yet, a hunt for studies on the consequences of reservations may throw up some surprising insights.

Thomas Weisskopf (2004), for instance, makes an important point through his review of studies on affirmative action policies in India. He argues that their main impact has been to change the character of the upper levels of Indian society. New groups have made their entry, changing the composition of the middle classes. The demographics of the higher and more powerful sections are being transformed and this may have some cascading effects.

Another kind of point about the consequences of reservations is made by Vandana Dandekar (2013), who examined medical colleges of Maharashtra. Her data shows that the doctors who have stayed on in government hospitals tend to be disproportionately from reserved seats. Those who left to join the private sector were disproportionately from open seats. Reservations seem to have generated medical personnel who are available to the poor. Here is another instance of the positive contributions that reservations have made to Indian society. While I do not say that they are conclusive, these studies show that reservations cannot be said to be uniformly useless and damaging. They at least provide some benefits.

Rethinking Meritocracies

The smoke and fury over reservations should not lead us to think they are the only or even the most important way of rethinking what it means to have a meritocracy. While reservations do help to some degree in bringing in people who otherwise would not have entered higher education or stayed at lower levels within

it, they create several problems, too. One criticism is that in India the sociological definition of social inequality tends to be restricted to the concept of caste. The shift from an individualistic notion of meritocracy to a sociologically informed vision needs to be more sophisticated than caste-based reservations and there have been several efforts in this direction. One of them is to revise the way we describe and understand social inequality and its consequences for education. The blanket category of caste and the method of using quotas is essentially a sociological category and administrative tool of the colonial era. This was the way social groups were recognised by British colonial social science and an administrative measure they found simple to execute. Social science's understanding of social inequality and the ways in which different kinds of social inequality interact and interweave with each other has moved far ahead of that. This can be made the basis of a fourth way, which takes multifactoral views of social inequality and uses them to build social and institutional interventions.

As an example, indices of disadvantage may be built using multiple sources of social inequality in education such as gender, family occupation, income, caste, region, medium of instruction up to Class 10, and so on. This will provide a much more accurate measure of educational disadvantage than caste alone. Existing data sets can be used to work out how much each respective factor contributes to an index and new studies can also be conducted for generating relevant data. Such multiple-factor indices can be used in institutions in a variety of ways, like building quotas or for weighting admission or promotion scores. Many Australian universities have such an approach in their admissions. Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, has used a version of this for decades. Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, too, has developed an index using eight factors drawn from NSS data, which it has integrated into its admissions process. This is not an area in which perfect, prefabricated answers are available. But, looking beyond caste-based reservations will lead us towards much better ways of targeting social inequality and building a meritocracy than we have at present.

I have already mentioned the need to rethink curricula, keeping in mind the social biases that might have crept into them. Another expression of a sociologically informed understanding of merit would be the redesigning of institutional processes of student support and teaching. The conventional way is to teach assuming that there is an average student and aim where that average student's head may be. But, if we think it is correct for admissions to be given to students from diverse backgrounds, then teaching styles need to change accordingly. One has to teach at multiple levels simultaneously. This is more complicated, it is true, and expects teachers to try out new techniques and ideas. But, the old way was based upon principles that were always untrue—that the students are homogeneous and the teacher's duty is only to teach the brightest and best. That some students do not learn was earlier blamed upon the students' lack of abilities alone. Now we begin to see that it was also because the institution did not care about their learning, focusing instead only on a dominant image of the "normal." If we believe it is valid and correct to have students of many different backgrounds, with different kinds of conceptual and practical knowledges then they all become valid claimants of an appropriate teaching style. It is no longer possible for the teacher to justify the students' differences in performance by their individual talents. The teacher—and the institution—must now take responsibility for all the students and not just the older elites.

There has been a tendency to admit students under the reservation quota and then carry on teaching in the usual way, blaming the students and the system if they struggle. Let us assume for purposes of the present argument that the admissions have been done in a reasonable way and the use of a diversity index has led to students being admitted who have a manageable internal range of variations. If that is so, then it should be possible to provide intensive support to the weaker students so that by the time their educational programme finishes they are at a satisfactory level of achievement. They would be able to graduate with a sufficiently high degree of competence and knowledge so that they can make useful contributions to society.

New Institutional Structures

Such an approach to teaching means changing the way teaching is institutionally organised. It may mean that we change how we calculate the teacher's workload and also the requirement of the number of teachers. Across the world this has meant creating new institutional structures, like teaching and learning centres in many American universities, which address the language problems of students along with various other academic orientations and skills they may need. The creation of a sociologically informed meritocracy means that institutional structures must change to address this different way of imagining the student body.

Imagining modern institutions has been a historical weakness in Indian civilisation. Implementing institutional practices that express individualism, rationality and reflexivity is a relatively new quality in India and we see it in pockets—some academic institutions, corporations, parts of the state, and so on. Now to create a modernity which on top of everything else also acknowledges communities and the social components of our existence! It will be hard work. But, the ideal of a meritocracy, of freedom and equality, drives us forward to try.

At the same time, it is good to know one's limits when talking about rebuilding institutions, curricula and pedagogy. Important as they are, they can only contribute so much to creating a more just and fair society. It has been pointed out that the time and attention reservations occupy in our minds and in the media actually draws our attention away from more effective measures. Those who like to think in terms of conspiracy theories suggest that this is a deliberate attempt to distract the people of India. While it is obviously difficult to prove deliberate conspiracy, the relative smallness of reservations in the larger scheme of things is easy to show.

To take just one example, consider the tremendous differences of quality within primary schools in India. The sharp gradient between high-fee private schools,

low-fee private schools, Kendriya Vidyalayas, single-teacher rural government schools, and so on is one of the structural causes of inequality in Indian education and thence in Indian society. Studies of social mobility in several countries have shown how the mobilisation of political pressure and institution-building have led to drastic improvements in educational facilities for the poor. The provision of good quality schools and tertiary education to the marginalised has greatly contributed towards creating a closer approximation to a meritocracy. In India, one of the great obstacles to our vision of a system where only merit matters, not where one is born, is the vast disparity between the different kinds of schools to which a child gets access.

It is sometimes said that admitting students on the grounds of their social disadvantage is a threat to meritocracy. But, the disparities in school quality are a much greater threat to meritocracy than anything we can imagine reservations doing. And, yet, there does not appear to be much action on this front. The allocation of money for primary education remained stagnant in last year's budget; in real terms it actually decreased. The allocation of money to the University Grants Commission has almost been halved, with strong signs of increased privatisation of higher education. That has the potential of knocking out of the education system large numbers of the marginalised and disadvantaged irrespective of their merit and talent. For those of us who believe in meritocracy, this represents a far greater danger and threat than most other things.

The way we have imagined meritocracy in the past is too narrow, ignoring the social contexts that shape it. A meritocracy is not created by just rewarding or not rewarding individuals on the basis of their achievements, though that, of course, is very important and we must be careful to note that rewards can include meaningful things beyond just money and power. A meritocracy is created by having social systems, and educational systems within them, that free individual interests and abilities from social origins. This means at least two levels of transformation in the way we think. First, merit has to be viewed not in an individualistic manner but in a manner that integrates the social context within it. Second, it means thinking institutionally so that institutional processes can be transformed. The modern educational institution is the main place today where we act out and put into practice our belief that merit is created and is not inherited. Our ideals challenge us to bring our institutional practices closer to our dreams.

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