Dealing with quotas in India's private universities

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[Policy](#)

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The government must devise strong educational mechanisms to help students from underprivileged backgrounds to compete.

The issue is a complex one and calls for a broad-based policy which encompasses continuing reservation for socially and economically backward students while also giving weightage to merit. Photo: Pintu Dasaundhi, Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-4.0.

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Caste-based reservation is back on India's political landscape. Some national political parties are clamouring for quotas for students seeking entry to the country's private colleges and universities.

In [early April](#), when the Congress strongly backed quotas for students from socially and economically marginalised communities, there was little or no dispute among political parties over an issue that has been hanging fire for almost ten years.

Four months later, the party [reiterated its stand](#), saying that it was "no longer possible" to ignore the demand for reservation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes.

In the past, the Supreme Court has passed judgements on reservations in "[private unaided institutions](#)" and declared them constitutionally permissible. But private universities are [not bound by law](#) to provide reservations to students from economically weaker sections of the population.

Recently, a parliamentary committee, headed by a Congress Member of Parliament, Digvijaya Singh, [recommended](#) that a legislation was imperative for making quotas – 27 percent for OBCs, 15 percent for SCs and 7.5 percent for STs – in private higher educational institutions.

The panel expressed concern over the low enrolment of students from economically depressed sections in private universities with Institution of Eminence status. High [tuition fees](#) in private institutions have kept them off limits for students from marginalised communities. In 2022-23, there was a high [dropout rate](#) amongst SC/ST students from the IITs compared to other undergraduate students from the general category. Reports say that it will need [four centuries](#) for SC-ST candidates to clear IIT entrance tests without the support of quotas.

An IIT-Kanpur alumnus and founder of the Global-IIT Alumni Support Group contended that the government should have more [targeted policies](#) for mainstreaming SC, ST and OBC students. The blanket policy of reserving seats for these communities caused more harm than it should have, the support group founder said. It affected their performance, and the level of psychological pressure a quota student goes through could not be ignored.

A December 2023 Education Ministry [report](#) pointed to more than 13,000 SC, ST and OBC students quitting their degree programmes at some of the IITs and top-tier management schools.

Social discrimination

They cited caste discrimination on university campuses as one of the major reasons. A suicide involving a [PhD student](#) at the University of Hyderabad highlights the prevalence of discrimination in educational institutions where Dalit students face biases that [range](#) from delays in transferring scholarship to allocation of PhD supervisors.

While quotas were implemented in the 1970s and 1980s for SC and ST categories, the government [reserved seats](#) for OBC and EWS (economically weaker sections) in the 2000s. But the reality today remains grim for reserved category students.

A [2023 report](#) by the All India Survey on Higher Education says that the total enrollment of SC and ST students in higher education stood at 14.25 percent and 5.5 percent, respectively. This is way below the national average of 26.3 percent. Most of these students are enrolled in undergraduate programmes across India. Of the 14.25 percent, over [13.5 lakh students](#) (about 52 percent from the reserved categories) dropped out of their respective programmes either due to academic pressure or harassment on campus by peers and administration.

The University Grants Commission launched a programme to [bridge the gap](#) between SC/ST and general category students. It has taken measures such as mandated teaching courses on social exclusion for students pursuing MA and PhD, workshops, seminars, empirical studies on social exclusion and building data banks for comparative studies to raise awareness and sensitivity towards issues such as marginalisation.

Students from all socioeconomic groups [prefer](#) government colleges and universities. Every year, students appear for CUET examinations after taking their respective board level exams with the hope of qualifying for public universities, despite upgraded facilities in private academic institutions.

Rather than adding another layer of reservation, it will make sense to examine what the public universities lack, and the reasons students from backward communities drop out.

Many students from marginalised backgrounds confront several challenges, including getting involved with household chores after they clear high school, leaving them with little time to prepare for college or avail private tuition.

With such disadvantages, they remain in no position to compete with students from general categories. In such a situation, the government could take steps to assist students from economically and socially weak sections while they are in school. Establishing neighbourhood coaching centres could help children living in slums.

There are other challenges. By the time the students enter colleges and universities, they are also expected to earn, especially those who belong to low-income families. This contributes to the high dropout rates.

When there are little or no job guarantees for high school graduates, irrespective of the social categories they belong to, the future becomes even more uncertain, especially when the informal sector is a poor alternative.

A [2022 report](#) by the Centre for Policy Research in Higher Education pointedly said that graduates from lowly-placed educational institutions, which attract students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, find it difficult to be employed.

Broad-based policy

Most private university students belong to families in the [high-income category](#). While some private colleges do enroll students from low-income families, they have [very few resources](#) to help these students move up the social ladder.

American non-selective private colleges that admit students from the bottom quintile have very poor resources, financially and academically. The lowest income students in such colleges have only a [7 percent chance](#) of making it to at least the upper-middle class by the time they reach their early 30s.

In India, privatisation of education has definitely improved access, but simultaneously, it has deepened commercialisation, compromised quality and bypassed regulation. The non-selective private universities only attract poor quality students from all socioeconomic categories, which does not improve upward mobility for marginalised sections.

It was reported in 2016 that only 42 percent of Dalit households had at least one literate member, as against 68 percent of non-Dalit households. Students from reserved categories, who do not get proper education, return to the same vicious cycle of poor living conditions and education and unemployment.

Additionally, these reserved category students face the risk of severe reverse discrimination and segregation in private universities. Given their family backgrounds, they are unable to match the lifestyles of their fellow classmates. This can lead to toxic resentment on both sides.

Many general category students hold the grudge that they do not get the opportunity to enrol in elite public universities because of reserved quotas, whereas students from reserved categories qualify with only 45 percent marks.

In these circumstances, the government could adopt a more broad-based policy, which encompasses continuing reservation for socially and economically backward students while also giving equal weightage to merit-based admission. As in South Africa, a rights-based approach could be adopted to engender a culture that respects diversity.

The government could take serious steps aimed at preparing students from marginalised communities to compete in exams such as JEE, CUET, NEET, UPSC etc.

A policy must be adopted to prohibit coaching centres from charging exorbitant fees that middle-income families are unable to afford. Such coaching centres could be directed to enroll SC, ST and OBC students so their training is at par with their general category counterparts.

Social equity would be achieved when students from marginalised and general categories are on an even keel.

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