

Beyond quotas

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The debate on reservations, affirmative action and diversity is back, but with a difference. As never before, it seems that some form of compensatory discrimination for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the corporate sector is on the agenda.

Manmohan Singh and most members of the Confederation of Indian Industry would prefer to leave the task of inclusion to voluntary action.

To them, affirmative action is a voluntary process, though it is not so voluntary in the US where it is enforced by legislative sanctions.

To most political representatives of Dalits, talk of affirmative action is eyewash: They would prefer strong laws, and therefore speak of reservations, equivalent to what exists in the public sector. Among business executives, some are outspokenly opposed.

Their leader is perhaps Rahul Bajaj, who spoke of a backlash if strong programmes were instituted.

Others, perhaps more cosmopolitan and aware that affirmative action has done nothing to destroy the competitiveness of US business, are ready to live with various programmes.

Among others, this includes the Tatas. There are differing opinions among Dalits as well. Some take private sector corporate executives as a thoroughly antagonistic force, and would prefer the security of a strong quota system.

Others, among them those speaking of diversity, believe Dalits themselves are potentially very competitive, and that industry needs only some prodding. Many Dalits have begun to go into business, making attempts especially in the IT sector.

In any case, whether the Bhopal conference in 2002, or last year's national summit on reservations in the private sector, voices urging affirmative action cannot be denied.

Meanwhile, human resource development minister Arjun Singh's declaration about implementing reservations for OBCs in educational institutions, including the IIMs and IITs, provoked controversy.

Upper caste students have started a movement to oppose this, though it lacks the fervour that was evident when V P Singh first sought to implement the Mandal commission report.

Manmohan, in fact, has expressed reservations about reservations, urging instead the expansion of educational facilities.

Dalits are cool to the issue; in some areas (especially UP and Tamil Nadu) the antagonism between Dalits and OBCs has steadily increased.

The tired old debate about merit versus social justice also seems to have lost its bite; companies recruiting in the normal procedure are not so thrilled with the merit of their non-reserved candidates.

In fact, the rigid examination system of India, coupled with almost systematic limitation of entry and various forms of discrimination linked with caste, not to mention limited educational opportunities all

around, has limited the field of recruitment.

Affirmative action programmes have the potential of vastly broadening the basis of corporate recruitment. Along with programmes for educational expansion, they can play a role not only for social justice but also for upgrading corporate performance itself.

Educational expansion means opening up the field of education itself, for new entries, new funding, new kinds of universities and programmes.

In this, there is still a heavy task for government, in funding education at all levels and ensuring norms are met, but it does mean letting in both foreign and national private players.

While reservation arouses violent emotions, it need not do so. Paying attention to caste is not casteist; in fact, social evils caste in India, race in the US cannot be remedied without paying attention to them.

It took a process of social movements in the 1960s, including a good deal of violence with large-scale urban revolts, for the US to begin to plan and implement its affirmative action programmes.

India has also seen extensive tumult, though more violence has been inflicted on Dalits than by them. In both cases, the violence and the antagonisms are a prelude to a more integrated and truly multicultural national life.

With a process of negotiation under way between Dalits and corporate executives, the reservations debate shows signs of hope.

The writer has worked extensively on caste issues.