



Institute of Governance Studies
BRAC University

POLICY BRIEF

Quota versus Merit: From Affirmative Action to Meritocracy

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A large number of applicants could not qualify the preliminary round of the 34th Bangladesh Civil Service examination despite securing better grades due to quota constraints. This has led to a series of protests in the capital and various universities bringing the quota versus merit based placement issue to the forefront of the debate.

While some argue in favour of quotas, a large section demands the abolition of the privilege paving the way for a merit based competitive qualifier. Nevertheless, the issue is not that straightforward. Reservation quotas, also known as affirmative action, have generated much anxiety around the world. At the same time, it has also eased social tensions and economic problems, bridging the gap between the elites and the underprivileged to some extent.

In the United States till 1970s it was thought that the African-Americans were inefficient and ineffective. However, with the state's affirmative action this underprivileged section has caught up with the country's white coloured people to large extent. Although collective backwardness is still there, from Bill Cosby to Barak Obama, individual success stories of the African-Americans are literally incalculable.

In South Asia no country has probably experienced more social tensions over the issue of merit versus reservations based recruitments than India. Dr Ambedkar, the key architect of reservation policy in the independent India, raised his voice in the parliament in 1927 to address the extreme economic and social backwardness of the *Dalits* (untouchables), originated in the Hindu social order. The caste system existed in Hindu religion since 1500 BC to 1950 AD when it was abolished in the Indian constitution.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, advocated affirmative action to overcome the country's social and economic disparities among *Brahmana, Kashtriya, Vysya and Shudra*. In

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1990 India's higher education institutions, public sector units and government bodies kept 22.5 percent of available seats reserved for scheduled caste and scheduled tribes which was raised to 49.5 percent in 2008 by including reservation for other backward category.

An *Economist* report shows that the various quotas in India have partly achieved their most basic objectives. In public jobs, for example, members of backward groups *Dalits* constituted only 1.6 percent of the most senior civil servant positions in 1965 that rose to 11.5 percent by 2011. Dalits represent about 16 percent of the general population of India.

The report also cited a study of 16 of India's biggest states looking at the effect on poverty in backward groups of their access to quotas of representatives spanning from 1960 to 2000. It was observed that for 'scheduled tribes', greater political clout has led to a small drop in poverty. However, for the 'scheduled castes' it has made absolutely no difference at all.

Singapore and Malaysia is a classic case as far as meritocracy versus reservation policies is concerned. Singapore declared independence from Britain unilaterally in August 1963, before joining the Federation of Malaysia in September. Amid racial tensions and ideological conflicts Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965. It was widely believed that the new born country could not survive on its own, due to scarcity of land, water, markets and natural resources. However, in less than four decades it has transformed itself from a third world to a first world country. Meritocracy has been one of the guiding principles of Singapore which ensures that the best and brightest, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background, find a level playing field to develop their fullest potential.

On the other hand, Malaysia's affirmative action programmes, also known as the *Bumiputera* policy, that favoured its local Malay community is generally identified as the reason behind the country's failure to overcome the middle-income country trap. It is suggested that to beat the middle-income trap, Malaysia needs to become an ethnically blind meritocratic society.

While global experience on the merit versus quota based development discourse is at best mixed, there is a tendency for countries to move from an affirmative action to a meritocratic system. In

the case of Bangladesh, only 44 percent of job-seekers can compete for civil service jobs through their merits. 56 percent of positions are filled up through various quotas- the children of freedom fighter (30 percent), female (10 percent), districts (10 percent), tribal (5 percent), and physically challenged (1 percent).

While the quota system has evolved over the years, Bangladesh Public Service Commission's decision to give the privileges to the quota applicants even at the preliminary stage of the exam is probably an ill-planned idea. It severely limits the scope for meritorious students to enter the civil service as well as could possibly deteriorate the quality of the civil administration.

Bangladesh's some of the best civil servants have studied the existing quota system for civil service recruitment and offered some sensible suggestions. A study by Dr Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad (Khan and Ahmad 2008)² on the same observed that 'recruitment of only 45 percent candidates based on merit is unconstitutional.'

They also opined that 'there is no legal basis of quota for the freedom fighters. This quota will be logical if it is proved that the freedom fighters are backward among the citizens. The Khan and Ahmad Study suggests that the legal basis of quotas for freedom fighters' children is weaker.' However, the recommendations made by the study have been ignored by the government.

The flaw of the quota system is also reflected in the PSC's inability to fill up the reserved posts owing to lack of enough candidates who could qualify the four layers of recruitment process. At the same time we see a large number of highly qualified applicants could not enter the public service constrained by quotas.

Thus, it is a high time to reform the quota system looking at internal realities as well as external experience. The Khan and Ahmad Study could be an excellent guide in this regard. Unlike India, Bangladesh's key advantage is the country's poverty and social backwardness are more of a regional concern than that of race or religion. It is largely a homogenous society.

² See Khan, Akbar Ali and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad March 2008. "Quota System for Civil Service Recruitment in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Analysis" 2008 , at [http:// www.bpsc.gov.bd/documents/news/ 25906 news.doc](http://www.bpsc.gov.bd/documents/news/25906news.doc)

The most disadvantaged section of the society, particularly indigenous people constitute only 1.1 percent of the country's population but they enjoy 5 percent quota in the public service. The freedom fighters' children quota is probably the greatest constraints to give room to a large number of meritorious applicants as it enjoy 30 percent of all the available seats constituting a small share of the population. Similarly, according to some experts, the district quota should also be downsized.

The growing discontents among the large section of applicants are happening at a time when Bangladesh's demographic window opens with more and more young population are crowding in the job markets. However, given the governance constraints and institutional bottlenecks the economy's job creation rate consistently falls behind its workforce growth leading to youth unemployment and loss of national output.

The state must recognize this problem and take the necessary steps downsizing as well as phasing out the quota system in a time bound manner. The rise of market based economy does not undermine the role of public sector. It rather demands a competent bureaucracy and an efficient state in managing the market. While affirmative action has probably served the nation's interest in the past, the system now demands reform accommodating more meritorious candidates in the public service. This is the way forward to develop a meritocratic society.

The Institute of Governance Studies (IGS), established in 2005, is an institute of BRAC University, a private institution of higher education in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The University, established in 2001, has a goal to provide a high quality, broad-based education with a focus on professional development to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary for leading the country with its quest for development.

IGS was established with the mission to identify, promote and support effective, transparent, accountable, equitable and citizen-friendly government in Bangladesh and South Asia. In pursuit of this mission, the Institute is dedicated to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of governance in Bangladesh and South Asia through research and academic pursuit. It aims to share the processes and path towards improving the foundations of governance in Bangladesh as well as regional and international forums.

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