

An Open Letter to Prime Minister of India

24 May 2006

To,
Dr. Manmohan Singh,
The Honourable Prime Minister of India,
NEW DELHI

Sub.: Reservations in educational establishments vs. demand for quality education – A five-point plan

Dear Sir,

Your impeccable academic credentials, simplicity, no-nonsense businesslike attitude to work had inspired a great sense of hope in the country. You were being viewed as an anti-thesis to the typical image of a politician that India had come to accept. This led to a euphoria, which was reflected in higher confidence among business houses, a booming stock market and a fast-growing economy.

It is really sad that while you appeared to be focused on the agenda of high growth, a prominent colleague of your cabinet pulled the rug below your feet. In an interview with a TV channel, I heard him recount how he decided to implement Mandal Commission recommendations, when he became Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in 1980, to fight small regional political parties. It was clear that his mind had not grown during the past two and a half decades. He saw reservations as a natural strategic step in the paradigm of politics that he understands. No, he did not argue about justice for poor and downtrodden. He unabashedly argued about the political benefits to Congress.

Historically, Congress was able to rise above all small regional outfits and command a national appeal because it never, at least officially, adopted such a cynical caste-based approach to politics. It seems that this is likely to be lost as the country plunges into a mini-civil-war of sorts.

In this hour of crisis, the nation looks upon you - a highly-educated, modern person with global outlook – to lead from the front out of this cynical muddle that, in spite of all that some might argue – will only harm you, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Congress party, and above all the country.

My humble contention is that the debate on reservations needs to be looked upon from the overall perspective of demand for quality education in the country. There is a massive unsatisfied demand for quality education in the country. The demand for reservations arises only because bulk of the educational system is low quality and is not in keeping with the aspirations of the people, and the needs of the industry and country. Let me explain.

A child spends about 12 years in school out of his approximately 16 years of total education. So, by this measure, school education is 75 per cent of the total education. When one looks at enrolments, the importance of school education is further underlined. Of the total admissions to class 1 in the country, hardly 10 per cent reach a college. In other words, more than ninety per cent of children in the country do not ever go to a college. For them, school is the only educational institution that they ever step into.

At the school stage, India has two parallel systems – (a) government run schools and (b) private / missionary / society / trust run schools. The former handles bulk of the children of the country. Almost every child in government run schools comes from a poor disadvantaged family. A significant amount of money is spent by state and central governments on such schools. However, the sad part is that the entire government school system in the country is in a pathetic state (Kendriya Vidyalayas are exceptions to this). A few decades back, children of upper middle class also used to study at government schools. Continuous decline has created such a situation that today even lower middle class does not send its children to government schools.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that a majority of the non-graduates being added to the nation's workforce every year come from government schools. Of the few lucky ones from government schools who do make to college, most have to be satisfied with studying at some C grade or D grade college.

There are no formal studies about the percentage of IIT / IIM / other premium institute students coming from government school background. Based on personal observations, I can, however, say that it is negligibly small. Any reservations in favour of SC/ST/OBC only help the students from expensive private schools and create no opportunities for the poor students from government schools.

The first necessary step for affirmative action in favour of the poor, disadvantaged of the country is to improve the quality of education in government schools of the country. On one hand it will help the few among them, who are able to pursue higher education, to go to good educational institutes. On the other hand – and this is the more important aspect – it will help the majority who remain non-graduates.

Most sectors of industry, including software and IT enabled services, employ a graduate even when they do not need a graduate. A good 12th standard pass should normally possess all the skills that a large number of industries need for most of the jobs. The industry is forced to take graduates since most 12th class pass boys and girls do not have the skills that they are supposed to have. This is truer in case of students from government schools than in case of students from private schools. To verify this point, it may be

worthwhile to conduct a study of the background of employees of call centres in the country. Almost all of them, whether graduates or non-graduates, come from private schools.

Improving the quality of education at government schools needs a major impetus from Government of India. Money is important for creating infrastructure and employing teachers, but more than money, there are soft issues like motivation and training of teachers. I most humbly suggest that Government of India sets up a high-powered Mission Team that takes up this challenge on a time bound basis. The Team should strive to create a situation that a majority of the seats in IITs, IIMs and other premium institutes get filled up by students from government schools, facing up competitive pressures and not on the basis of any reservation.

Moving beyond school education to college education, one sees an expanse of mediocrity and inaction. Lakhs of students appear for IIT entrance every year not only because IITs are good, but also because most others are terrible. There has been some talk of increasing seats at IITs and IIMs. While that may be desirable, it is more desirable to improve the standards at other institutions, not just in the fields of science, engineering technology and management, but in every field and faculty.

There is no doubt that adding seats to IIT or IIM is relatively easy compared to reforming colleges and universities manned and managed by incompetent and lazy teachers, who deserve to be unceremoniously kicked out. All the same, it is a job that must be done if India has to rise to be a world-leader. And I am confident that with a distinguished academician like you at the helm, this is the time in the history of India, when it can be done best.

While on one hand, you must initiate steps to reform colleges and universities, there is an urgent need to also look at “trade union / guild controlled” education in the country. Significant parts of professional education in India are controlled by trade unions / guilds instead of academicians. Medical education is a classic example.

For decades, Medical Council of India (MCI) has worked on a single-point agenda – of keeping medical graduates in India down to a minimum. This is, probably, done to enable the existing doctors to charge hefty fees. India must be the only country in the world, where number of students graduating in any particular year in allopathic medicine is less than one fourth of number of graduates in homeopathy, ayurved and other alternative systems of medicine. To illustrate the point about MCI’s evil designs, one needs to just look at the conditions prescribed by MCI in respect of a new medical college. A few years back, one could open a medical college on 12 acres of land. With the development of building technology and high-rise buildings and keeping in view the increasing pressure on land, one would have expected that MCI would reduce the land requirement. On the contrary, MCI increased it to 25 acres with the added rider that it should be in one campus.

On the lines of MCI, Institute of Chartered Accountants of India has made it a policy to fail more than 95 per cent of all students who appear for its exams. The purpose, like in the case of MCI, is to keep the number of Chartered Accountants within limits.

Medical Council of India and Institute of Chartered Accountants of India are trade unions / guilds. They have a commitment to their members and not to the country or academic excellence. I most humbly suggest that the statutory rights of all trade unions / guilds to conduct examinations or certify institutions should be taken away. Such rights should rest solely with independent boards manned by academicians. Quality professional education in the country needs a major expansion and no trade union / guild should be allowed to stand in the way.

Seats in quality professional educational institutes can be compared to the scenario in telephones. There was a time when one had to wait for years to get a telephone. There used to be an elaborate system of ensuring equity in telephone allotment, with quotas for various types of applicants. This sounds ridiculous today when one can have as many telephones as one wants.

In the educational system, broadly speaking, there is no shortage of seats at any level (except in fields where trade unions / guilds have created artificial shortages). The need for reservations arises due to the fact that almost 98 per cent of the seats in the educational system (including school and all types of colleges) are of poor quality. It makes no sense to drag down the top 2 per cent to the level of the rest.

Reservations will be meaningless even for the so-called beneficiaries if the quality of the top institutions is compromised. Will a SC/ST/OBC student based in a village in Madhya Pradesh like to go to IIT in Delhi, Mumbai or Chennai if an IIT is no better than the NIT / Government Engineering College at Bhopal? By increasing the reservations to 49 per cent, we risk reducing the quality level of IITs. It is much better to take up the flip side of the question as a challenge and raise the quality standard of NIT and Government Engineering College at Bhopal to the level of IITs.

I suggest that you use your illustrious friends in the academic community to convince the so-called lower castes that an overall massive expansion of quality education at all levels will help everyone including them, while lowering quality standards will help no one.

It is also necessary to talk about the fundamental values of our Constitution – Justice, Equality, Liberty and Fraternity. Reservations or for that matter any affirmative action can be justified only if it furthers these fundamental values. In the present form, reservations have ceased to further these values. There can be no justice or equality or liberty or fraternity when one sees the son of a scheduled caste IAS officer get into an IIT through reservations, after having studied at the best possible school, while the meritorious son of a rickshaw puller is forced to adopt his father's profession.

My personal observation at some of the IITs tells me that almost all the reserve-category students are either second-generation beneficiaries or come from the economically advantaged sections of society. It is essential to exclude these from the benefits of reservations to enable the benefits to percolate down to the really needy and deserving. This exclusion is also necessary to stop the withering away of the feeling of fraternity due to reservations. The civil war like scenario unfolding across the country can help no one.

While, doing away with reservations completely may be the ultimate goal, the following formula is suggested for adoption in the short term:

- a) Each institute / college will admit reserve category students, who do not obtain the minimum cut-off marks prescribed for general category, to a separate preparatory course. Reserve category students, who obtain the minimum cut-off marks prescribed for general category, will be admitted like general students.
- b) Total reserve category students offered admission in a year (admitted like general students + those admitted to preparatory course) will be 49 per cent of the total notional seat capacity of the institute.
- c) Preparatory course students will get two chances (in two successive years) to clear the entrance exam and score the minimum cut-off mark prescribed in the year in which they attempt the examination. After clearing the entrance exam, the reserve category student (who was earlier admitted for preparatory course) will be admitted to the regular course. If any preparatory course student fails to get the required marks after two attempts, he/she will be asked to quit the institute.
- d) Reserve category will exclude creamy layer and will also exclude second-generation beneficiaries of caste-based reservations. In other words, any student whose family owns more than the prescribed area of land and anyone whose family income is above a certain limit as well as anyone whose father or mother had ever taken any benefit of caste-based reservations in any form will not be eligible for inclusion in the reserve category.
- e) Reserve category will be further sub-divided into SC, ST and OBC.

The above formula is suggested as a compromise formula, which will enable your government to keep face by implementing 49 per cent reservations, while at the same time satisfying the demands of equity, justice and equality raised by the vociferous opponents of reservations.

I must, however, hasten to add that the above formula should not be viewed in isolation of the suggestions made by me earlier.

Kindly permit me to repeat in brief my humble suggestions, which are as follows:

1. **Set up a Mission Team for improving the quality of education at government schools in the country.** The Team should strive to create a situation that a majority of the seats in IITs, IIMs and other premium institutes get filled up by students from government schools.
2. **Reform of existing colleges, institutes and universities,** not just in the fields of science, engineering, technology and management, but in every field and faculty.

3. **Doing away with artificial shortages created by trade unions / guilds.** Statutory rights of all trade unions / guilds to conduct examinations or certify institutions should be taken away. Independent boards manned by academicians to have the rights enjoyed by guilds like Medical Council of India and Institute of Chartered Accountants of India.
4. **Major increase of seats in professional educational institutions.** This is most necessary in fields like medicine and accountancy, where artificial shortages were created. Of course, that is not to mean that seats in IITs, IIMs and such institutes should not be increased. However, any capacity expansion must not be at the cost of quality.
5. **Implementing a formula for 49 per cent reservations, which ensures no dilution of standards and eliminates creamy layer as well as second-generation beneficiaries.**

I hope that you will kindly pay due heed to the above five-point plan. I am confident that the above five-point plan is doable and will not be politically damaging either to you or to the Congress party. Above all, the plan will help the country move with a higher speed on its path to growth and prosperity.

Thanks & Regards,

Anil Chawla