India as Knowledge Power
The Subtle Inequalities of Education*

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It is a great privilege and honour to speak at the USI and be asked to deliver the annual National Security Lecture. The members of this organisation represent exemplary Indians, whose contribution to defending and building India leave us both humbled and grateful. In the overarching subject of 'India as a Knowledge Power', the theme that I have chosen for today is education, or to be more specific *'certain neglected inequalities in the sphere of education'.* There is almost a national consensus that education is necessary to secure India's future. There have been some astonishing and encouraging development in recent times. Till a few years ago academics used to debate whether there was a demand for education. Do poor parents want to send their children to school? Now that question seems laughably patronising. Poor parents are going to enormous length to send their children to school, often at great private expense. The question now is whether the system can meet the demands? The second piece of good news is that state allocations on education have increased and the Right to Education Bill finally looks like it will become a reality. Enrolments are also up.

But these positive trends cannot disguise some issues of pressing concern. First, as reports by every single independent organisation suggest, learning outcomes in schools are abysmal. Fifth graders who cannot write their name or do elementary addition testify to how poor learning outcomes are. Second, there are still great disparities in access to education. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, has not really addressed these disparities. In some cases, it has exacerbated them. Third, there is an acute shortage of trained teachers, the single biggest bottleneck in improving learning

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outcomes. Under conditions where the demand for education is high, people's expectations have been rightly aroused, such unequal access to education is bound to generate great resentment. We also have two additional problems. While spending on primary education has increased, secondary education remains underfunded. Given India's demographic profile, spending less than a sixth on secondary education compared to what we spend on primary is unsustainable. Higher education, a critical area for the economy is also somewhat in a shamble. While there are a few islands of excellence, the vast bulk of the University system, public or private, is of very poor quality. Think of the political and security consequences of this. What will happen when thousands of graduates discover that their education has not equipped them for much? The paradox of India's education was captured the other day in a leading English daily, which carried two news stories back to back. One news story as describing that the recruitment for a handful of posts of peons had attracted more than twenty thousand applications, mostly from graduates! On the other hand, the same paper carried a story that India faces acute skills shortages. We know from comparative political experience, that youth unemployment can be a source of great political instability. We don't yet have a strategy for improving India's universities.

But my focus today is not these large issues. I just want to draw attention to two neglected dimensions of inequality in contemporary debates. The first is around social inequality in schools, the second around inequalities produced by the merit system. The Right to Education Bill was long overdue. While the quality related provisions of the bill leave much to be desired, one of its more interesting provisions is the requirement that private schools take in at least 25 per cent students from marginalised communities within the neighbourhood. Since the state will reimburse the schools based on its average spending per child, some see in this provision of the bill elements of a voucher system. But this provision could, if implemented correctly, usher in far-reaching social changes. It will force us to confront an unspoken issue in Indian society: how we educate children into a culture of equality and reciprocity in the face of immense inequality. *While there is an abstract allegiance to norms of equality and rights in a formal sense, the social mores and interpersonal norms of recognition are marked by all the disfigurements of hierarchy.*

In many ways, recent social developments have contributed to the evasion rather than a resolution of this issue. One of the, perhaps unintended, by-products of the reservation discourse was this. On the one hand, it immobilised far more discomforting discussions about discrimination and the norms of social behaviour that would give minimal meaning to recognising the equal moral worth of all citizens; on the other hand, it converted what should have been a discussion about debilitating hierarchy into a political clash over identity.

Second, despite the rhetoric of inclusion, our institutional architectures were *de facto* creating new forms of segregation. One of the biggest worries about private education is that, despite all its promise, its capacity to segregate by class is immense; fee structures make this an inevitable outcome. Arguably, the top private schools are now even more upper class than old "convent" schools. Within the state structure itself, the state was able to give access to but not dismantle social hierarchies. One of the most shocking pieces of research suggests that Dalit children were more likely to be subject to corporal punishment at the hands of government school teachers. This is a shocking finding to which educators have not paid attention. The fascination amongst the poor for private schools comes from a sense that they have more power over those schools than they have over government schools. One of the reasons for preferring private schools by the poor is the perception that low-end private schools, whatever their quality, are less likely to be degrading experiences for their children. And many government institutions have also encouraged a form of segregation. There are other interesting patterns. A few years ago, it was possible for children to "mix" across social classes, at least in the streets and parks which were available as open spaces. Those spaces exist even less today. To be sure, that form of mixing was still marked by a sense of hierarchy and power, but in an odd sense privileged kids a few years ago were more likely to have a sense of deprivation than they do now.

There is also a subtle transformation happening in caste relations that is positive, but still one that poses interesting challenges for social relations. The sense of empowerment and dignity amongst Dalits has been growing. There are interesting measures of this. In many cities, the marginalised, even those in

a relationship of servitude, assert a sense of dignity in one crucial respect: by their refusal to clean toilets, at almost any price. In some ways, this is an astonishingly encouraging phenomenon. To invert Gandhi, the revolution is not how many upper castes clean their toilets; the revolution is measured by how many lower castes have the option of refusing to clean other people's toilets. This change is not as widespread as one would wish, but it is clear and palpable. But it is precisely this moment of rightful reclaiming of dignity that also makes the question of social relationships across caste and class divides tricky. The worry about being slighted, even unintentionally; and on the other side an uncertainty about how to handle this new social state leads to a kind of safe harbour of isolation. On college campuses certainly, there is a subtle dynamics that often makes *de facto* ghettoisation a psychologically more comfortable zone than the labour of creating norms of reciprocity. These changing dynamics complicate the still powerful markers of social hierarchy; the master-servant relationship, although transformed in some ways, experientially inscribes hierarchy more than any abstract teaching of equality can counter.

How much social mixing the legislation will produce is an open question. But implemented properly, it could force parents and children to confront the dynamics of hierarchy and exclusion in a way in which they have not had to. Even the most privileged schools will have to ask: what does the pedagogy of inclusion truly entail? Our entrenched hierarchies or embarrassed avoidance of this question will now have to be squarely challenged in our schools. But we would be living in a fool's paradise if we think negotiating this issue will be easy. At the most mundane level, schools will have to cope with students with vastly different economic and family backgrounds; even supposedly enlightened universities have not found it easy.

Second, a lot of research suggests the disquieting possibility that students from marginalised groups under certain conditions perform comparatively poorly in the presence of upper caste kids. Their sense of self-esteem can be adversely affected by this social experience. For the privileged it can, sometimes in subtle ways, provide more ground for expressing their prejudice. It is fair to say that very few of our teachers are trained to handle complicated social dynamics; if government schools are any guide, they are

perpetrators of exclusion. None of these challenges constitute an excuse not to implement this significant step towards a common school education system. On the contrary, it reinforces the idea that we need measures to reverse the trends that re-inscribe social hierarchies.

Arguably, the process of assimilation in common spaces would be made easier if the relevant criteria of inclusion were not exclusively caste. The objective should be to remove deprivations based on caste, but using the instrumentality of caste itself to address that deprivation often reinstates the very identities we are trying to dissolve. Doubtless, this is a complicated issue. But make no mistake about it: teachers, parents, administrators and students will now be truly tested in how they shape their own sense of 'self' in relation to others. It is one thing to not discriminate, to support the social uplift of the marginalised and engage in the rhetoric of equality. It will be quite another challenge to make the school a site where all kinds of children can feel equally at home, and the promise of common citizenship be redeemed.

The second issue I want to turn to is this. The question of meritocracy is often debated in the context of affirmative action or reservation. I want to just highlight some subtle aspects of the meritocracy question. Debates over examinations embody not just technical pedagogical questions, but a vast array of social anxieties and aspirations. The reaction to possible changes in admissions criteria for the IITs was a small example of this phenomenon. A few months ago, the Singapore education minister provoked great discussion by suggesting that Singapore was a "meritocracy of examinations", but America was a "meritocracy of talent". Examinations don't pick out a vast array of unquantifiable forms of talent necessary for a vibrant and creative society. The minister was suggesting that Singapore would do well to incorporate other elements as well. The relationship between talent and examinations is a deeply vexed one. In an examination system there is the worry: what exactly are we trying to pick out through an exam system?

But there is another disquieting question about the relationship between examinations and meritocracy. America fits in oddly in the category of "meritocracy". At an intuitive level we understand

that America is extraordinarily open to talent, from wherever it comes. But it is not a meritocracy in the classic sense. Its powerful institutions of access to education and other forms of power never have and still do not rely exclusively on what we would classically define as criteria of merit. Its institutions have vast discretion to use a range of considerations, including a candidate's wealth, in determining admissions. What is striking about the American system is how much discretion is built into it at all levels. In fact, the more radical question the American experiment poses is this: why do we assume that for a society to be able to nurture a vast array of relevant talent it has to be a meritocracy all the way down? There is one sense in which it has to be meritocratic, namely that people are not excluded from participating because of who they are, based on characteristics like race, ethnicity or gender. But, beyond that it is an open question - what principles nurture talent?

It is no accident that societies that are closer to being meritocracies, like Singapore and possibly China, are based on examinations. Pure meritocracies require objective measures of selection. Although this is not a necessary consequence, meritocracies usually are suspicious of what we might call judgment and discretion. In India, we signal meritocracy by largely removing all those criteria of judging talent that might be open to judgment and discretion. Pure meritocratic societies are likely to be examination based.

But meritocracies have other paradoxical effects too. Kapil Sibal's efforts to reduce the stress levels on our students are salutary. But here is the bad news. It is very likely that stress levels related to seeking your place in a meritocratic society will increase, not decrease. The sheer pressure of numbers suggests this outcome. We often forget that so far our education system has had limited reach. Once millions more students start competing to find their place in the objective distribution curve of talent, the pressures will only intensify. If you think pressures in India are great, just read accounts of what China's national examination system that determines places to universities entails. In theory, you could argue, that stress will not rise with numbers if you have a vast array of institutions, where supply keeps up with demand. But this will not be sufficient. For the stress associated with examinations depends upon the consequences attached to not

coming out on top. This in turn will depend upon the structure of economic opportunities on offer. The more egalitarian an occupation structure, the less severe are the perceived penalties for not coming out on top. Europe has in part escaped the neurosis, a meritocratic competition can induce because there is greater background equality. In short, stress is not primarily about education. It is about the economy. The real debate we need is on the kind of occupational structure we see emerging. What then is the relationship between education and that occupational structure?

But the relationship between meritocracy and equality also turns out to be more complicated. As many in the IIT debate sensed, the character of admissions criteria determines who will do well. Some think a single examination favours the privileged, because they can invest in coaching; others think a board result plus an examination criteria will favour the privileged doubly over. But all agree that meritocracy must act as a counterweight to privileges of wealth. But here the comparative evidence turns out to be more complicated. For the instruments we use to pick out talent, examinations and so forth, seem to vastly give advantage to those with access to a wide range of goods and privileges. How to design principles of meritocracy, which genuinely aid social mobility, is not as easy a question to answer as we suppose.

Meritocracy also has two peculiar psychic consequences. One of its unintended consequences is that it inculcates the idea that those who are left behind are somehow less worthy; and it creates a new form of inequality in turn. There is also an argument to be made that over the last twenty years or so, it is precisely meritocracy that has ideologically underpinned an ideology of great inequality. As some social observers have noted, people who rise through the system based on an idea of merit also have a greater sense of entitlement to all the fruits of their effort. What is interesting about income inequality in places ranging from the USA to China is not the fact that it exists. It is that people at the top in particular and society more generally also came to the view that those at the top deserved what they have. They deserved it in part because they rose by the dint of their own talent. There is an odd sense in which privilege has to justify itself, but merit does not. However, the consequences can be more paradoxical than we think. Perhaps Aristotle was right in thinking that societies need "mixed

constitutions" to function well. They require an array of competing and diverse principles, rather than a single architectonic principle like merit.

There is a frustrating simple-mindedness to our debates over education. The excessive focus we have put on IITs and IIMs is a manifestation of this. While we tinker with them, several actions underway in our system, including the way new universities are being built, continue to weaken our prospects as a society. But debates over education are so narrow and short-sighted because we are not placing them in the right frame. These debates are fundamentally about the character of modernity we are about to create. Unless Indian modernity takes into account how education is marked by different kinds of inequalities, it will remain deeply vulnerable.