

OBC Reservations: An IIT Faculty Member's View

Prof. M. Balakrishnan, IIT Delhi

Nearly six decades after independence, this country is planning to announce that majority of its population is backward and does not have equal opportunity to pursue education and employment. Along with this, it is going to open up a Pandora's Box by various caste groups to be classified as "backward". What an interesting way to begin the 21st century when finally India was beginning to emerge as a serious player in the new knowledge economy! The major carrot that is being doled out is the seats in the elite medical, engineering and management Institutes. What bothers me is no one is interested in even consulting the people who have built these Institutions and brought them to this stature. I have strong views on efficacy of reservations in general but here I would confine myself to the issues concerning IITs. At least here with my three decade long association, I can claim to know something. Many of these arguments may be applicable to the other elite Institutions in medical and management disciplines as well.

Today IITs are considered excellent educational institutions. There is a countrywide scramble to get into these with many students spending the best part of their teen years in preparing for its entrance examinations. This should not be confused with ranking of universities where just a couple of IITs make it in the top 500. These rankings deal primarily with the research output and not with the quality of undergraduate education. I can confidently say that any ranking of quality of undergraduate engineers produced would put IITs in the top 20 worldwide if not in the top 10. **And it is this achievement that is going to be hard to maintain with the proposed reservations policy.** Before we go any further, it would be best to examine how this excellence has been achieved.

The fundamental contribution that the Central Government has made to these institutions is in generous funding (by Indian, not global standards) combined with unmatched autonomy. The main point of engagement between the Government and these Institutions has been through the appointment of Directors. Except for a brief period during the last administration, the Governments had refrained from any major politicking in these appointments. They have by and large appointed the best available applicant Professor from the same or another IIT for the job. These venerable people had themselves a great pride in these Institutions and have ran the Institutes with the best of their abilities (maybe not always efficiently but always fairly) without major vested interest.

For someone outside IITs to understand the power of this position is not easy. The Director virtually appoints the complete senior administration including the deputy directors and deans, chairs all the faculty selections including that for the Professors, is the chairman of the senate and thus the academic head, is the financial head and also the administrative head. For most people living in the campus, which includes 90% of faculty and students, he is also the chairman of the local municipality (all major complaints on water, electricity, sewage etc. would reach him). This ensures that the buck almost always stops with him and thus decision making is unavoidable. This autonomy that has been the hallmark of these institutions is being eroded. There were attempts in the last Government (fortunately not vigorously pursued) to tell IITs *what to teach*. **The present decision would strike at the fundamentals of IITs as the Government no longer feels *whom to teach and how many to teach* is best decided by these Institutions themselves. This in my opinion is the most dangerous**

fallout as it strikes at the very core of the success of these Institutions. Once the lines of control get blurred, there would be no stopping, as today's political functioning is clearly not dictated by long term vision. Soon we could have reservations in faculty and create a caste based patronage system which has destroyed many of the once excellent state universities.

In IITs, the faculty selected and promoted solely based on merit has maintained a high standard of ethical behavior, have taken their teaching and research seriously, refrained from politicking themselves and supported the Institute in many ways to fulfill its commitments. Who are these faculty members? A large number are our own alumni (undergraduates as well as postgraduates), majority of them have studied or conducted research in the west and almost all of them have had opportunities of pursuing financially much more lucrative careers in India and abroad. Thus each faculty member is here by choice and he/she has exercised that choice with one major attraction - opportunity to teach, interact and work with extremely bright students perhaps unmatched anywhere. **It is this attraction that is being tampered with. In a situation where all IITs are short of faculty and desperately trying to innovate to attract faculty under the constraints of the pay commission dictated salaries (while competing with Sensex based salaries), this is not a pleasant development.**

IITs have had reservations for SC/STs for decades. Why would this be different? Aren't these students likely to be better prepared than the students admitted under the existing reserved category? Here I would like to share some of the facts with the readers. IITs have been admitting SC/ST students for years under two modes. From the general category, a significantly lower JEE cutoff is decided and reserved category students scoring above this cutoff are admitted directly to the UG programmes. Another still lower cutoff is decided and reserved category students from this set are admitted to a *one year preparatory* course conducted by IITs themselves. After passing this course, they can join the programmes without having to appear in JEE again. Even this exercise collectively yields less than 15% in IIT Delhi though the quota amounts to nearly 22.5%. Half of the reserved category students manage to clear courses comfortably while the other half struggle on the margins. What would be called a good performance (cumulative grade point average or CGPA of 8 and above) and is achieved by nearly forty percent of general category students, is rare and occurs once in many years among the reserved category students. It is not that all general category students do well. There is nearly a 5% "dropout" rate even among them which is a cause of concern but mainly attributed to the burnout due to JEE preparation phase. The "dropout" students have no effect on teaching as they neither are regular nor make their presence felt in classes. The remaining part of weak students is too small and at present hardly any instructor would pitch his / her course at that level. On the other hand, the present policy may introduce a large band of weak students which no instructor can ignore. This would definitely result in drop in the quality of education. **It is the hypocrisy of the highest order that on one hand the reservation for SC/STs is considered a success and quoted for extension to OBCs, and on the other hand, no hard data on the performance of these students is available in the public domain. Some administrators I talked to consider this data as sensitive!** Analysis of where the reserved category students go after graduation would be enlightening. I do not have the *sensitive data* but my experience shows that most of them either go to services like IAS/IES or to the public sector companies. Normally this choice of careers by IIT graduates should be a matter of satisfaction except that both these entries are again using the reservation quota. Is it empowerment or crutches for life?

In this whole episode, the most stunning news for me was when the Hon'ble minister announced increase in intake to compensate for the reservations. This would amount to nearly 56% overall increase in undergraduate intake in the IITs. This showed complete ignorance of what makes IIT undergraduate education tick. There are few Institutions in the world where undergraduate students get to interact one to one and so freely with such high-caliber faculty. Students are advised on courses in small groups, interact over hostel dinners, go on industrial trips and finally carry out a well supervised project. Every undergraduate student does an intensive "novel" project either individually or in groups of two and he/she is effectively "supervised" by a faculty member. Many of them result in publications. This system evolved when the student-faculty ratio was 6:1 and is getting strained at the seams when it has reached 12:1. In some disciplines like Computer Sciences and Electrical Engineering where market competition is heavy, it has already gone to 20:1 and above. **Though currently producing excellent results, it is a highly non-scalable mechanism. Intake increase on this scale, when effectively faculty strengths in key areas are decreasing could sound a death-knell to one of our few international brand names.**

I have a poser for Prof. Jayati Ghosh, my well renowned colleague from JNU and a member of the knowledge commission. She has justified reservations in IITs based on the poor ranking of IITs internationally. Her argument is anyway these Institutions are not great, why they should crib about the quality of intake. She nowhere states that any of the 400+ odd Institutions worldwide which are ranked above IITs have achieved their status through reservations. In that case all Tamil Nadu Engineering Colleges with 69% reservation for decades (openly defying the Supreme Court suggested norm of 50%) now should be at the top.

Postscript: Finally, I would like to seek opinion on the composition of our next Olympics team. We have admittedly done much poorer in sports than education. Should our next Olympics team be chosen on caste basis or perhaps with adequate representation to athletes aged 40+ who are at present completely unrepresented? After all we do not have much to lose as we only win one bronze medal in alternate Olympics. I would no longer be surprised if some future Sports Minister considers caste based quotas for our national cricket team. After all that would be worth a few votes and the nation would have been well prepared by then to cheer only for its own caste brethren!

The author is a Professor of Computer Science & Engineering at IIT Delhi. He has been with IIT Delhi since 1977 except for a three year stint outside India. Currently he is on Sabbatical and working with a startup. The views represented here are completely his own.

M. Balakrishnan (mbala@cse.iitd.ac.in)
5, Taxila Apartments
IIT Delhi Campus,
New Delhi - 110016