

Faculty reservations is one way to ensure this

At the time Smriti Irani was unceremoniously removed from the education minister's job, the story doing the rounds was that she was at loggerheads with the prime minister's office on providing more autonomy to the IIMs, a critical component of the government's plan to build 10 world-class public and 10 private educational institutions. But now, it appears, the government is planning to introduce caste-based reservations in the IIMs, apparently in keeping with the reservations in the rest of the country. While the government can pretend that there can be full autonomy for the IIMs to decide on their own admission policy and their own curriculum even while there is reservation for faculty, the truth is the two are fundamentally antithetical. Once there is reservation at the level of the faculty, each institution will be forced to dilute teaching standards and curriculum to ensure the reserved positions get filled up—this is something that has been seen in once well-regarded universities, and there is no reason to believe the IIMs will be any different. The government's belief that it is all right to have quotas since these institutions were set up with public money, of course, tells its own story since it accepts that there can be different standards/restrictions for public and private organisations.

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There is no doubt there is a need to help those whom society has discriminated against, the under-privileged and those without access; indeed, there are societal externalities to be gained from this. But there can also be no doubt that this is being overdone since, for instance, it cannot be argued the OBCs have been discriminated against. Similarly, while it is obviously true that higher education is the ticket out of poverty and is therefore a powerful argument in favour of reservations, centuries of discrimination can only be brought to an end with serious thought going into it. Ideally, reservation is best done at the level of school since it is, in any case, the high dropout levels here that ensure there aren't enough SC/ST/OBCs making it to college on their own. Successive governments, however, have pushed reservation in colleges as well—the lack of preparation in school, including special classes for those in the reserved category, has meant that, more often than not, those graduating from colleges in the reserved category don't fare that well in the jobs market either. But, more important, if the government hopes to give those in the reserved category the best shot at the future, this can only be done with faculty chosen because it is top-class, not because it belongs to a certain caste group—if that is so, it lowers the value of the education and defeats the very purpose of the reservation. The fact that students making it into college under a reserved category need to then be assured jobs through

reservation is, of course, the clearest indicator that the policy isn't working and, more than anything else, it is just another redistribution policy. At a time when India's competitors are advancing so fast—just look at the number of Chinese universities in the global rankings versus India's—and when the knowledge advantage is so critical, it is a pity India remains so focused on dumbing down its centres of excellence.