

# PRIVATIZE IIMS AND IITS

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Professors of IIMS and IITs are opposing the extension of reservation from present 27% to 49% as proposed by HRD Minister Arjun Singh. The basic question is of accountability. These institutions were established by the government for the expansion of higher education in the country. The government has the right, nay a responsibility, to modify the objectives in the light of changing conditions. Just as a car bought for personal work can yet be used as a taxi if the owner so decides, likewise IIMs and IITs can now be asked to expand higher education among the weaker sections. Just as the driver appointed for driving the personal car should have the option to resign when asked to drive a taxi, likewise Professors who do not find the new objective satisfying should be allowed to resign and seek jobs elsewhere. But Professors do not have an occasion to oppose the move of the government. They are accountable to the government and the governments accountable to the people. The people will judge whether the Government's move is in their interests or not, not the professors who are beneficiaries of the present arrangement. The demand of autonomy also does not cut much ice. Autonomy to these institutions means they are free to use people's money without any accountability. Who will set the objectives for which people's money should be used and ensure that the institutions are fulfilling them? Director of IIM Ahmedabad Professor Bakul Dholakia has said that the institutes spend much time 'managing the government' and that distracts from their main work of imparting quality education. In that case, Professor Dholakia should resign and join or set up a private institution where he can provide quality education unfettered by government interference.

Similarly former Professor of IIT Delhi Prof Indiresan has suggested that these institutions have repaid the investments made by the government and they should now be let free to grow like one lets a child grow after attaining maturity. But the analogy does not apply. They can never fully repay the debt of the government just as a child never fully repays debt of the parents. IIMs and IITs cannot ever repay the debt of the government and they have to ever strive to secure welfare of the people.

The second argument against expansion of reservation is that it will lower the quality of students. Notwithstanding the success, it is debatable whether the 'best' students are getting admitted into these institutions. Actually the cultural background of the students influences their chances of getting admission. The issue was agitated in the United States in reference to allegedly lower IQ of black students. Academicians showed, however, that the questions were framed in a way that was friendlier towards white students. For example, in order to assess mathematical ability, a student may be asked: "Number of free channels in TV are 20. Total channels are 78. How many paid channels are there?" Alternatively they may be asked "Number of orange trees in the orchard is 20. Total trees are 78.

How many other trees are there?" Both questions are identical from the standpoint of mathematics. But the cultural context of the first question is 'white' while that of the second question is 'black'. White students were found to do well if the first question is administered and black students if the second question is. Thus, the best white students were ranked as having higher IQ though they were not the 'best' students. The same logic applies to IIMs and IITs. Those admitted are not necessarily the best students. There is a good chance that they are admitted because they belong to a particular background. Reservations will provide forced entry to the best students from among the backward castes who may truly be the best.

Expanded reservations are not likely to affect the quality for another reason. It is indeed difficult, if not impossible, to determine the 'best' among the top five percent of candidates sitting in an entrance exam. One of the procedures adopted during interviews for admission to IIM is that of group discussion. Ten students are asked to discuss a particular subject while two or three faculty members look on. It is easy for the faculty members to agree on the best two or three candidates among the ten; but virtually impossible to determine who is the best among the top two or three. The differences among the top students are so subtle that they defy quantification or easy assessment. It would not make any difference to the quality whether 'A' or 'B' was selected from among the top two. The implication is that good students from among the backward castes are likely to be as brilliant as the best students among the upper castes.

The government is, therefore, justified in expanding the scope of reservations. That said, better alternatives are available which should be considered. One alternative is to privatize the IIMs and IITs. These institutions were established by the government when there was a lack of technical and managerial education in the country. That objective has now been fulfilled. These institutes should be sold to the highest bidder just as public sector undertakings in the manufacturing and services sectors. These institutes provide the service of education much like the State Bank of India provides the services of bank transfers. The money obtained should be reinvested in setting up new premier institutes in sunrise areas such as internet, architecture, WTO negotiations, online service provision, international law, medical transcription, translation, etc. The government should move on to fulfil the newer needs of the country.

Second alternative is to replace the reservations system with point system. Additional points can be given to students from Scheduled Castes, rural areas, backward states, etc. in the admission process. The United States Supreme Court recently upheld such a policy of the University of Michigan. Such arrangement will provide encouragement to students from diverse backgrounds without much compromising the quality of students. A third alternative is to impose a heavy tax on the students and professors of these institutions. Let the students pay one-half of their post-graduation incomes and professors ninety percent of their consultancy incomes to the government. This money can be used to establish new institutes or to provide education vouchers to the poor or low-caste households.

The Professors of the institutions are promoting their self-interests in opposing expansion of reservations. ✍✍