'Faculty selection must be done on merit alone'

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The government's move to implement a quota system for faculty at IITs seems no different than the one put in place for students. However, it will have a much greater impact and, more importantly, hurt the interests of reserved category students the most.

Authorities insist that reservations will be implemented without compromising on quality. This effectively means there will be a reduction in the total number of faculty slots, if suitable candidates are not found from the reserved categories.

However, if the reserved slots remain vacant for long, it will inevitably lead to allegations of discrimination, creating a pressure which will result in effectively diluting the standards for recruitment.

Simply put, the reservation policy is likely to witness lowering of entry criteria for candidates, as in the case of students. This in turn will result in lowering of quality of the faculty. Any such dilution will not only sound the death knell of these islands of excellence, but will also go against the spirit of reservations for students.

The quota system for students is supposed to help those from underprivileged groups secure quality education, for which they will not be able to qualify without some help.

But the quality of education imparted by these institutes is because of the faculty. If reservations are implemented by lowering the standards, it will lead to hiring of mediocre faculty. The quality of education (and research) will inevitably decline. Though all students will lose as they will all be recipients of "poor education", students from reserved category stand to lose the most.

It is a fact that most of the weak students of IITs are from the reserved category. And it's not surprising, considering their eligibility criteria for securing admissions are lower than those of the general category. They need more help and guidance from the faculty.

But if the quality of teachers and education falls, it will hurt these weaker students the most. In essence, it will defeat the very purpose for which the reservations for students in these institutes were planned. The impact over time will be huge. Lowering of faculty quality can mean lowering of education for generations of students over the next 20 to 30 years — something that cannot be taken lightly. This in itself is a strong reason to ensure that faculty selection is done on merit and merit alone.

Reservations in faculty will help secure a few jobs for people from these categories, but at the cost of reducing the quality of education imparted to generations of students from the same category.

So, is the move desired even by the communities it is supposed to serve?

Perhaps these communities should be asked if they want this trade off — a few extra jobs or higher quality of education for everyone, including the youth from their own communities?

And let's not underestimate the larger danger to these institutes. It takes hard work to build an institution, and decades or even centuries to build top-class academic institutions. But it is not so hard to reduce a good institution to a mediocre one.

India is full of such examples where good centres of learning have now become examining universities of average quality. There is no reason the current set of institutes with some amount of excellence will not go that way once non-academic agenda becomes a dominant factor. Perhaps this is the real agenda — to bring the elite institutions down to the mediocre levels prevailing all around. Perhaps these "islands of excellence in a sea of mediocrity" are doomed to be engulfed by the sea around.

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