

Quota versus merit



M. SHAHIDUL ISLAM

FOLLOWING the publication of the preliminary test results of the 34th Bangladesh Civil Service examination the quota versus merit based placement issue has come to the forefront of public debate. While some argue in favour of quotas, a large section demands the abolition of the privilege paving the way for a merit based competitive qualifier.

Nevertheless, the issue is not that straightforward. Reservation quotas, also known as affirmative action, have generated much anxiety around the world. At the same time, it has also eased social tensions and economic problems, bridging the gap between the elites and the underprivileged to some extent.

In the United States till 1970s it was thought that the African-Americans were inefficient and ineffective. However, with the state's affirmative action this underprivileged section has caught up with the country's white coloured people to large extent. Although collective backwardness is still there, from Bill Cosby to Barack Obama, individual success stories of the African-Americans are literally incalculable.

In South Asia no country has probably experienced more social tensions over the issue of merit versus reservations than India. Dr Ambedkar, the key architect of reservation policy in the independent India, raised his voice in the parliament in 1927 to address the extreme economic and social backwardness of the Dalits (untouchables), originated in the Hindu social order. The caste system existed in Hindu religion since 1500 BC to 1950 AD when it was abolished in the Indian constitution.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, advocated affirmative action to overcome the country's social and economic disparities. In 1990 India's higher education

institutions, public sector units and government bodies kept 22.5 percent of available seats reserved for scheduled caste and scheduled tribes which was raised to 49.5 percent in 2008 by including reservation for other backward category.

An Economist report shows that the various quotas in India have partly achieved their most basic objectives. In public jobs, for example, members of backward groups Dalits constituted only 1.6 percent of the most senior civil servant positions in 1965 that rose to 11.5 percent by 2011. Dalits represent about 16 percent of India's population.

The report also cited a study of 16 of India's biggest states looking at the effect on poverty in backward groups of their access to quotas of representatives. It was observed that for 'scheduled tribes', greater political clout has led to a small drop in poverty. However, for the 'scheduled castes' it has made absolutely no difference at all.

Singapore and Malaysia is a classic case as far as meritocracy versus reservation policies is concerned. Amid racial tensions and ideological conflicts Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965. It was widely believed that the new born country could not survive on its own, due to scarcity of land, water, markets and natural resources. However, in less than four decades Singapore has transformed itself from a third world to a first world country. Meritocracy has been one of the guiding principles of the city state which ensures that the best and brightest, regardless of race, religion and socio-economic background, find a level playing field to develop their fullest potential.

On the other hand, Malaysia's affirmative action programmes, also known as the Bumiputera policy, that favoured its local Malay community is generally identified as the reason behind the country's failure to overcome the middle-income country trap.

While the global experience on the merit versus quota

based development discourse is at best mixed, there is a tendency for countries to move from an affirmative action to a meritocratic system with their economic and social progress.

In the case of Bangladesh, only 44 percent of job-seekers can compete for civil service jobs through their merits. 56 percent of positions are reserved for various quotas- the children of freedom fighter (30 percent), female (10 percent), districts (10 percent), tribal (5 percent), and physically challenged (1 percent).

The country's some of the best civil servants have studied the existing quota system for civil service recruitment. A study by Dr Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad (Khan and Ahmad Study) observed that 'recruitment of only 45 percent candidates based on merit is unconstitutional.'

They also opined that 'there is no legal basis of quota for the freedom fighters. This quota will be logical if it is proved that the freedom fighters are backward among the citizens. The Khan and Ahmad study suggests that the legal basis of quotas for freedom fighters' children is weaker.' Nevertheless, recommendations made by the study have ignored by the government.

The flaw of the quota system is also reflected in public service commission's inability to fill up the reserved posts owing to lack of enough candidates who could qualify the four layers of recruitment process. At the same time we see a large number of highly qualified applicants could not enter the public service constrained by quotas.

Thus, it is a high time to reform the quota system looking at internal realities as well as external experience. Unlike India, Bangladesh's key advantage is the country's poverty and social backwardness are more of a regional concern than that of race or religion. Bangladesh is largely a homogenous society.

The most disadvantaged section of the society, particularly indigenous people constitute only 1.1 percent of the country's population but they enjoy 5 percent quota in the public service. The freedom fighters' children quota is probably the greatest constraints to give room to a large number of meritorious applicants as it absorbs 30 percent of all the available seats constituting a small share of the population. Similarly, according to some experts, the district quota should also be downsized.

The growing discontents among the large section of applicants over quota system are happening at a time when Bangladesh's demographic window opens with more young population are crowding in the job markets. However, given the country's governance constraints and institutional bottlenecks the economy's job creation rate is consistently falling behind its workforce growth leading to youth unemployment and loss of national output.

The rise of market based economy does not undermine the role of public sector. It rather demands a competent bureaucracy and an efficient state in managing the market. While affirmative action has probably served the nation's interest in the past, the system now demands drastic reforms accommodating more meritorious candidates in the public service. The government must recognize this problem and take the necessary steps downsizing as well as phasing out some quotas in a time bound manner. Such reform could be a big leap forward towards a meritocratic society.

The author is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS), BRAC University. He can be reached at imonsg@gmail.com

"Loss and damage from Climate Change"

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

THE issue of "Loss and Damage from Climate Change" is a relatively new, but rapidly emerging, topic of debate and discussions in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It was first raised some years ago by Solomon Islands on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) as they were concerned about the complete

loss of some of their islands due to sea level rise. However, it did not get much support until the sixteenth Conference of Parties (COP16) held in Cancun, Mexico in December 2010 where the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group strongly supported AOSIS and got a Work Programme on Loss and Damage included in the Cancun Adaptation Framework.

The work programme was further elaborated at COP17 held in Durban, South Africa in December 2011 after which a series of technical and regional workshops were held on different aspects of loss and damage. All countries also submitted their views on the topic.

The Doha Decision on Loss and Damage:

At COP19 in Doha, Qatar in December 2012, the results of the technical workshops along with the submissions from countries and organisations were taken into account in negotiating the next steps on the topic. This opened up a very heated debate between the developed countries (led by the United States) and the developing countries (led by AOSIS but also strongly supported by the LDC Group). This debate led to all night negotiations even after the official time for the COP to end was over.

The sticking point was the AOSIS and LDC demand for the creation of an "international mechanism on loss and damage" which the rich countries opposed tooth and nail.

In the end a compromise agreement was reached to examine options "including an international mechanism" and take a further decision at COP19 to be held in November 2013 in Warsaw, Poland.

Bangladesh's role:

Bangladesh has been playing a very pro-active role on this topic both within the UNFCCC negotiations as well as outside it. In Cancun the Bangladesh delegation played a pivotal role in bringing the LDC Group in support of AOSIS. Then again, in Durban Bangladesh proposed much of the text that was finally adopted on the work programme.

Finally, in Doha the Bangladeshi delegation was very much in the forefront of the tough all-night negotiations with the US delegation who ultimately backed down.

Outside the UNFCCC also the government, researchers and civil society have also been playing an important role in taking this issue forward. For example after Durban a consortium of research organisations including several Bangladeshi ones such as the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) and BRAC University were selected through global competition to carry out a series of national and country level studies.

The Bangladesh consortium has published a number of seminal papers which have been presented both in Bangladesh and internationally (most recently in Bonn, Germany during the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies meeting in June).

Many other developing countries have expressed interest in learning from the Bangladesh experience.

Going Forward to COP19:

It is now expected that the debate will move to Warsaw during COP19 in November where Bangladesh has an opportunity to continue its pioneering contributions by building on the success of the in-country research and discussions, to pro-actively develop a "national mechanism on loss and damage" which could then inform a possible "international mechanism" in Warsaw. Bangladesh may even spearhead an effort to adopt a "Warsaw International Mechanism on Loss and Damage" at COP19. This would indeed be a major achievement, especially since it will face stiff opposition from the developed countries.

The writer is Director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development at the Independent University, Bangladesh. Saleemul.huq@iied.org

Premier peddling fear

AKHTAR SHAH

THE esteemed Premier is peddling "fear". Her scare tactics are about both the party leaders ending up in jail. The Prime minister says its because of the opposition leader's insistence of a supervisory non partisan (caretaker) government to see out the National Elections.

What conclusions can one draw from such rhetoric?

- The leader in power is crying wolf!
- Having ramrodded parliamentary procedures (easy done when holding a sizeable majority) and abolishing the Caretaker system. She is democratically entitled to insist on "her way or high way" of holding the national elections. Absolutely correct procedurally, but 'inappropriate in spirit'

Compare this to some British MPs milking their expenses, most of them who 'abused' the system claimed that they stayed within the rules, indeed they did. what they had chosen not to explain was that they had bent spirit of the rules. The rules had stated that they were entitled to legitimate expenses in the course of their parliamentary duties. Some of them chose to interpret such expenses to include some of their own household private expenses. Which ever way one wishes to skin the cat! It's morally and democratically wrong.

- Finally, one could draw a conclusion that, there is a "ghost force" waiting in the wings which disapproves (primarily for thief own benefit) what's being served up as "Hobson's choice/s" in the name of democracy.

This force is simply waiting for such a plum opportunity to grab power and expose all of the misdeeds of AL government's (just it did of BNPs) and justify their actions to the people. As a side show, some from this unelected bunch will also be able to make some dubious deals and fill their boots! Nothing afterwards may be done to bring the culprits to book. Just as 1/11.

Lets embellish, it would appear that a sizeable number of the populace are fed up with this 'tug of war' game every

four years. What does this achieve? Nothing, same sherbet in a different bottle! Both the parties when in power uses and abuses the hard earned national wealth in the name of running the government! Mostly bickering, collecting plaques, garlands, speeches, inaugurations of various public sector infrastructure projects, arms deals and collection some international benchmark rolls of honours, just to name a few. Not trivialising any content or form of this list here, as some of them are results of hard working citizens who get zero to nothing acknowledgement of their work. Once in power having enjoyed this amber nectar, unwilling to endure a four year withdrawal symptom period, they resort to prevarication.

The more serious point of this 'fear' of a so called ghost force is, both parties push people to such an extent that they feel totally helpless to make changes to this destructive power game of dynasties. I have nothing against Political families being in power as long as impartial meritocracy is upheld for the sake of the country.

BD has seen way too many catastrophic violence of monumental proportions. Mainly because of opponents being pushed to their limits. Utter desperation sets in and results in behaviour (never justified in a democracy) that can only be described as, jungle warfare. Killing of the father of the nation was the very first one. The leader was lulled into a false sense of security believing that no one would harm him. There were people at work wanting to undo his work. Sycophantic people surrounding him also played their game of making the leader believe that "all was quiet on the Western front". Hardly so, the wrongdoers were gathering force and were able to convince some decent minded people to turn a blind eye. The leader was kept in the dark by people with vested interest who liked chaos. This only becomes possible when a sizeable section of the population is made to feel that there is no alternative other than acts of severe violence by a small number of wrong doers.

Without intending to make a comparison, the announcer of Independence after Father nations arrest 1970, fell foul of a similar cunning plan by conniving parties. He too was

killed in a violent manner as a result of a revenge agenda and miscalculation of circumstances (not wishing a debate). Making a point of the importance of dialogues.

Current Prime minister herself showed her utter despair after the killing of BDR senior staff, stating that, "why do we have these killings" or words to that effect.

Readers, I have no intentions whatever of rewriting history or putting forward my version of events or to be 100% accurate for any reason or a version. I am certain the accuracy of my narration will be questioned, but the thrust of my point is that currently both leaders are pushing the boundaries of democratic norms of non violent dialogues to a limit that will only offer a 'low lying fruit' of an opportunity to the "political bandits" who do not have the slightest respect for democratic norms. This only germinates thoughts in people with evil minds who see violence as the only solution to any problems in a stalemate.

1/11 was a result of complete intransigence on the part of both parties. A total and wilful absence of decent, tolerant, civil and democratic behaviour. What did it achieve? Two years of rule by unelected people who made some questionable financial decisions and delivered an election. Their misdemeanours may never be questioned or face a judicial enquiry. It appears in the present day political climate no lessons have been learnt and neither of the leaders are talking about ensuring that there is no repeat of such an occurrence. There is a great danger that it will turn into a Sisyphean task.

Mrs Prime minister, it's time that under your leadership, the current situation is looked at objectively and casting aside party politics to deliver an election formula that creates a stable, calm, cooperative and non violent atmosphere in the country. This will in the least offer a stable and peaceful Bangladesh, where all citizens will get on with creating wealth and opportunities for the future generations. You owe this to the country.

Akhtar Shah is a British Entrepreneur of Bangladeshi origin. E-mail: aban58@hotmail.com

ACROSS

- 1 Early bird?
- 4 Said "not guilty"
- 8 Molt
- 12 By way of
- 13 Emanation
- 14 Rent
- 15 Work unit
- 16 Whirl
- 17 Long-billed wader
- 18 Sprinter's device
- 21 Many millennia
- 22 Parcel of land
- 23 Allude (to)
- 26 Driver's license datum
- 27 Foundation
- 30 Out of control
- 31 "Oklahoma!" baddie
- 32 Stead
- 33 Vat
- 34 Haw partner

DOWN

- 1 Prior nights
- 2 Encircle
- 3 Lady
- 4 Cleric
- 5 Pea-family plant
- 6 Ms. Brockovich
- 7 Hung
- 8 Half a circus clown's pair
- 9 Vagrant
- 10 - The
- 11 Red
- 12 Dilbert's worksite
- 19 Stench
- 20 Go a few rounds
- 23 Snitch
- 24 Ostrich's cousin
- 25 Pass (off)
- 26 Total
- 27 Auction action
- 28 Wet wriggler
- 29 Payable
- 31 Football garb
- 32 Genie's home
- 34 Chapeau
- 35 Expires
- 36 Marching-band section
- 37 Half of 49-
- 38 Booty
- 39 Other-wise
- 40 Census statistics
- 41 Snare
- 42 PC picture
- 43 "Unh-unh"
- 44 Attend

Solution time: 27 mins.

DOH ADO BLAIS
EKE SAM YOLKIS
CAR TWEETYPIS
APT ANGLE
FIZZ OAK BLAH
URN SERENA
VOILA RRODS
ENOUGH JAT
TENS EGO XIREN
GRASP IRE
SYLVESTER LAW
PAEAN EPA ATE
AMINE SHY NOR

Yesterday's answer 6-8

CRYPTOQUIP

CLYC XJSNKFYW CLFJO
KZUJH CZ HGFXJ UYWFZNH
HSYWUJH. FA OYSC. CZTYI
LJ GJAC YAT HCZKJ Y HCZKI.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: BECAUSE THOSE SONGS ARE ABOUT SOFT DRINKS, MIGHT YOU PUT THEM UNDER THE CATEGORY OF POP MUSIC?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals T

BEETLE BAILY by Mort Walker

OKAY, MEN, LET'S START OUR HIKE

ARE YOU NUTS?! THERE'S A HURRICANE OUT HERE!

COME ON, IT'S JUST BREEZY

EASY FOR YOU TO SAY...

YOU'VE GOT BALLAST!

HENRY by Don Trachte

FOR SALE INQUIRE WITHIN

FOR SALE INQUIRE WITHIN

FOR SALE INQUIRE WITHIN

NOBODY HOME

QUOTABLE Quotes

"Seize opportunity by the beard, for it is bald behind."

Bulgarian Proverb