

# Stay the Course

If politics is about prevailing by any means possible, then statesmanship is politics by the best possible means. The difference between the two is aptly illustrated by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's handling of the proposal to introduce reservations for representatives of the other backward classes (OBCs) in central institutions of higher learning. Indeed, so distant is the government from statesmanship that it seems unable to prevail even on an issue supported by all political parties! But the government's discomfiture is not the point. The real tragedy is that a just cause is being made to look like petty politics.

Over the past year, this journal has been part of the significant strand of national opinion that supports OBC reservations in higher education as a progressive step that is long overdue ('Merits of Mandal II', April 15, 2006). We have highlighted the urgent need for reliable evidence on the social composition of elite higher education; the challenges posed by internally differentiated aggregative categories like the OBCs; the imperative of engaging with crucial yet unexamined concepts like merit; and, finally, the need to design affirmative action programmes adapted to the specificities of higher and professional education. We have also expressed our deep disappointment with the Moily Committee ('Myopic Oversight', November 4, 2006) for having squandered an invaluable opportunity to provide alternative views on the creamy layer and other critical issues. The latest setbacks are no doubt the price paid for its inexplicable silences.

In its eagerness to save face in the procedural battle over the Supreme Court's stay order, the government risks losing the larger ideological war over social justice. Even if the special bench constituted by the chief justice of India were to offer it some relief on May 8, this will not undo the damage that the government's case has already suffered in the eyes of public opinion. Repairing this damage is not easy, particularly since the urban middle classes are a biased "public", being largely upper

caste and devout believers of simplistic notions of merit. But it is not impossible either, provided the case is argued with honesty and clarity, backed by the passionate sense of purpose that good politics is all about.

Unfortunately, these very qualities have been conspicuously absent in the UPA's handling of this issue. Perhaps this is where prime minister Manmohan Singh must step in to provide much needed vision and leadership. He is, after all, uniquely qualified, being a man of both politics and higher education. From this exceptional vantage point, a damage control exercise can be initiated that seeks to strengthen the weakest aspects of the government's case, namely, its inability to adequately address the key issues of evidence and merit.

The government must demonstrate its commitment to the collection of reliable nation-wide data on social inequality and backwardness by forming an expert group for this purpose. This would reassure the courts and end the hypocrisy of an establishment that blocks the collection of such data while simultaneously using its absence to question policies of reservation. The group could include social scientists and members of the statistical bureaucracy, along the lines of similar groups on poverty or unemployment. The time to prepare for the Census of 2011 is already here, and the blunder of 2001 – when pleas to include caste were resolutely ignored by the National Democratic Alliance government – must not be repeated.

In a parallel move, another expert committee must be set up to design context-specific affirmative action policies for elite higher educational institutions. To ensure adequate authority and autonomy, this group must be constituted by the prime minister's office along the lines of the Sachar Committee. The committee would ascertain the social composition of higher education, examine the meanings and measures of merit, and devise detailed plans for introducing reservations without compromising standards. Since its findings will interest the courts, the committee must include an eminent jurist, along with responsible academics sympathetic to the

cause of reservations. Among the biggest obstacles to reliable research in this area are the educational establishments themselves, which have generally denied access to relevant data. This cannot continue, and access must be ensured. The main task of this committee will be to clarify the widespread confusion between claims based on absolute benchmarks of competence and those based on relative ranking. Once the necessary absolute benchmarks are met, can relative ranking be combined with other relevant criteria to regulate entry? What ethical-legal implications follow? Will standards suffer even if entry and exit benchmarks remain uniform?

Such measures will harness the expertise of the intelligentsia, exploit the professional affinity for questions of evidence that it shares with the judiciary, and circumvent the latter's allergy to the legislature. Above all, they will inject some credibility into a campaign strangely lacking in conviction. They may even decide whether the UPA government stays the course in the fight for social justice, or allows its course to be stayed. **EPW**