The Sociology of Merit - III

Merit and the Middle-Class

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Many social scientists believe that behind the idea of merit often there lies a hidden terrain of injustice. A denial of merit to most Indians is done, not through their laziness or stupidity, but just through a lack of access to schooling, and an inequality of resources. Merit itself may be defined in unfair and incorrect ways through a distorted curriculum or a curriculum which biases selections in favour of certain cultures over others. In a society with so many different strata and so many kinds of inequalities, some will have an unfair advantage over the rest in gaining the label of merit.

Assuming, of course, that the label does correspond to what is inside the bottle, and is not just another case like the botany topper who had no idea how to raise a plant.

Yes, many would agree that in our society merit is not to be taken at face value. But why then is it so deeply moving a concept? Merit is what inspires millions of students and their parents to come out into the streets in its defence. What is the fault, they say, of the hardworking person who toils day and night to finally gain entrance to a prestigious institute, only to be pipped at the post by a reserved quota candidate. This scenario disturbs them greatly and challenges their most deeply held values. The opponents of reservation feel violated and injured. Some of them go so far as to declare the denial of merit through reservations as an assault on our nationhood itself.

The idea that merit should decide the distribution of rewards and positions in society is a relatively recent one. India had seen for many centuries just the reverse the Mughals, for instance, restricted positions at the top to Turks, Afghans and Iranians and, sometimes, extended this reservation to Rajputs as well. The caste system developed the world's most detailed system of reservations, strictly stipulating who could and could not aspire to higher ranks. It is a rather new idea that we can and should compete in an open examination, which does not ask who one is born as, but only examines what one has become.

The open, meritocratic system was brought to India by the British, by the same British whom we never cease to blame for all the problems in our education and culture. Whatever else they may have messed up here, the open examination system was definitely a great improvement in terms of a legal guarantee that no one would be discriminated against. Among the British, too, this was not an ancient tradition. Like in India, the notion of merit had always existed in a narrow and restricted form. There had been accepted the idea of equality within a circumscribed community all adult males of a certain age were equals within a jati in India and selection of a leader took place relatively freely within that. But not across all communities in a country. When it first came, it was a revolutionary idea in England to select men for public service on the basis of open examinations.

The previous system in England, just like India, was one of patronage and nepotism. Rich and influential members of the ruling aristocracy would appoint their relatives and followers to important positions in the state. While ability was important, the family of one's birth was a sharp demarcation and lines of descent formed a boundary around the privileges of the powerful. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the rise took place of commercial and manufacturing classes and they, too, demanded a share of the pie. The rising middle classes led the demand to open up the closed circle of power. Science was an important aid in this campaign. It provided convincing arguments and evidences that the differences between people were created by society and not by a special god-like being. Science was a very compelling weapon for demolishing the special rights claimed by the aristocracy. If all were born equal then none could claim special status merely by birth to privilege.
Thus emerged the claim to merit.

The professional, trading, manufacturing groups demanded that positions in the state be opened up to those with qualities achieved through hard work, study and special ability. The middle and upper-middle classes were going in increasing numbers to study in universities and the definition of merit began to be done in the symbols of the university. Desirable qualities were typically defined in terms of the curriculum and examinations acquired there. The basis of legitimacy for power began to change. Merit was now increasingly seen as the source of legitimacy, much more than birth into royal families. As a society this marked an important step in the transition from a closed, inheritance based society into an open, achievement based one.

England saw in the 18th and 19th century a marked increase in the freedom of many men. Science and merit were important contributors to that process. However, merit had another side to it, which quickly emerged.

The first large-scale open examination which recruited people on the basis of merit was set up for the Indian Civil Service. The directors of the East India Company resisted this fiercely, but the British Parliament finally prevailed over them in 1853. Within Britain itself, the British elite managed to stave off competitive exams for their internal civil service for many more years. Yet, the dilemma in merit may be seen from those early times the administrators of India were chosen on the basis of their knowledge of Greek and Latin! The ICS exam was held in England for many years, sharply curtailing the number of Indians who could sit for it. It took a long struggle for it to be held in India as well. The British middle-classes were willing to push for equality and merit so long as it served their interests. But were quite reluctant to support the same demand from their own poor or from the residents of their colonies.

When the British brought their educational system to India, examinations were an integral part of it. Communities with previous histories of literacy and of service to the rulers of the older states were amongst the first to adapt to the new system. The radical step of open examinations was typical of the British contribution to dissolving dividing walls in this country. Not that they had an unblemished record in this regard, since they were also active in devising other kinds of religion and community based quotas for recruitment to their army, etc. Yet, it was the British educational system and their system of government employment which gave a strong impetus to renewing a vision of human equality in India. Processes like these were responsible for eventually leading Indians to question the special status of the British themselves. Thus emerged the Indian freedom struggle and the Constitution of a free India that guaranteed the equality and freedom of all.

The history of merit as a concept helps us to understand its appeal and its role in the culture of the middle-class. It was central to the rise of middle-class and gave it its legitimacy. Merit was embedded in a vision of people rising up on the basis of hard work and acquiring educational certificates which gave the stamp of correctness and justice on their newly acquired power and wealth. However, like many popular beliefs, merit also hides dark secrets: it hides the inequality built into the system. This is easy to see in a now distant example: the few who became members of the ICS thought themselves to be deserving and meritorious. The many who were left out because they could not sail to England for the exam thought otherwise.

The legitimacy of merit is based on several half-truths. It is based on the denial of opportunity, on a system which insists that only some can be meritorious and not many, on a system which certain knowledges get privileged over others only because of the distribution of power in society. That the Indian middle-class finds this lack of legitimacy difficult to digest is hardly surprising. It goes against the grain of the culture which sustains and motivates them. Questioning merit means to question individualism, to question the justice of the job market, to question the justice of
consumerism. These are all central to the middle class culture today. Yet, equality and freedom, too, continue to be attractive principles. Perhaps they may still inspire greater honesty and courage in us.

Merit may be a great improvement over nepotism, but it is now in the need for serious re-examination. The challenge before us is how to create a society where merit really speaks for equality of opportunity and does not serve as a label that legitimizes systemic inequality and injustice.

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