

# 1 DEMOCRACY AND MERITOCRACY

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At least since 1947, when India became independent, the question of merit in Indian political and policy discourse has got inextricably entangled with the basic principles of democracy. That is the political system India came to adopt at Independence, and its core premises and expanding reach have inevitably colored discussions of merit.<sup>1</sup> In this note, I explain why democracy did, and had *partially* to, undermine merit as an organizing principle of Indian polity and society. Merit essentially came to mean the reproduction of ascriptive social hierarchies in India, an idea a democracy could ill-afford. But the undermining is partial in that inclusionary projects basically mark the functioning of the public sector, whereas the idea of merit, in principle, has migrated to the private sector. It is unclear whether, eventually, the ideals of social inclusion will be politically thrust on the private sector, though some demands in that direction have already been made.

## **Merit in the Mirror of Democracy: A History, and its Indian Variant**

Since it acquired the form of universal franchise in the 20th century, democracy and merit have been two different ways to organize a polity and society. When the franchise was not universal, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, democracy had some connection with merit, though the lines between *merit and privilege* were blurred.

Generally, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, the right to vote was accorded on the basis of property, education and gender, for it was believed that only the propertied and educated men had the rational ability and intellectual capacity to exercise vote in a mature fashion. Women, children and the poor did not. Even in the US, which had the highest franchise in the world after the Jacksonian revolution of the 1830s, all whites, regardless of wealth or education, might have received the right to vote, but the non-whites and women were excluded.

Moreover, the argument about whether people, *via* vote, could elect their rulers was conceptualized differently for the colonies. John Stuart Mill, arguably the father of modern liberalism, drew a distinction between white colonies and non-white colonies. The former colonies were “of similar civilization to the ruling country; capable of and ripe for representative government: such as the British possessions in America and Australia”.<sup>2</sup> And the latter set included “others, like India (that) are still at a great distance from that state”.<sup>3</sup> Governance in such countries only allowed for “a choice of despotisms”,<sup>4</sup> not vote-based representative government.

One could, in principle, link Mill’s distinction to the idea of merit. Being an extension of the European civilization, white colonies had the intrinsic merit to deserve democracy; non-white cultures were not so meritorious. Presumably, the latter also included parts of China (Hong Kong) and Malaya, not simply India. Indeed, James Mill, John Stuart’s father and a prominent intellectual of his time, explicitly included the Chinese as a “subordinate nation”, just as the Indians, the Persians, the Thai and the Malays were.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The progress of India’s democracy has an uneven quality. India’s electoral record is much better than its protection of liberal freedoms. See Ashutosh Varshney, 2014, *Battles Half Won*. References in the footnote here and below are unfinished. Full footnotes will be provided later.

<sup>2</sup> J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Three Essays*, 15-16. References in the footnote here and below are unfinished. Full footnotes to be provided later.

<sup>3</sup> *Three Essays*, 16

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government*, 410.

<sup>5</sup> James Mill, *The History of British India*

In the era of universal franchise, the link between democracy and merit has clearly been broken. As voters, we don't habitually elect those trained at the best colleges and law schools, nor is our right to vote dependent on whether we are educated, or have high grades. In India, there was no big debate during the constitution-making (1947-49) about whether only the educated (or the propertied) ought to be allowed the right to vote or the right to run for elected office. Rather, the argument that generated consensus was different. Though educated at Trinity, Cambridge, like few others in India at that time, Jawaharlal Nehru argued<sup>6</sup> that universal franchise, including everyone, poor and rich, educated and uneducated, men and women, upper and lower castes, was based on the great twentieth-century premise, wrongly dismissed earlier, that "each person should be treated as having equal political and social value".<sup>7</sup> Nehru, whose role in the instituting India's democracy is beyond doubt, also argued: "Civil liberty is not merely for us an airy doctrine or a pious wish, but something which we consider essential for the orderly development and progress of the nation".<sup>8</sup> This was the reason why, despite admiring the Soviet Union for its massive economic achievements in the 1930s and 1940s, he would claim that "Communism, for all its triumphs in many fields, crushes the free spirit of man".<sup>9</sup>

In short, *equal dignity of all and elected political representation* are the basic organizing principles of modern-day democracy. Merit, however conceptualized, is not, and cannot be, a democratic cornerstone. Democracies must represent all, even if those it seeks to represent have not crossed the great yardsticks of competitive education, or succeeded competitively in the economy.

But does democracy ignore merit altogether? In what form can merit emerge in a democracy? Did it in India?

### **Good Education? Good Jobs?**

The fact that modern democracy must embody the principle of equal worth of all does not mean that access to public appointments or higher education can also subscribe to the same principle. Even if inclusionary principles are applied, those meritorious must be given their due weight. Bureaucracies, armies, courts, universities and corporations are not parliaments. Some of the biggest political battles in post-1947 India have indeed been fought on the question of how to conceptualize merit and how to combine merit and inclusion.

Here, a brief background note on caste would be instructive. The caste system has been, historically, an integral feature of Hindu society, constituting about 80 per cent of India today. (It has affected non-Hindu communities as well). The caste system was envisioned as an ascriptive division of labor, with a clear birth-based hierarchy, also incorporating notions of pollution and purity. To simplify a little, the system had a tri-partite formation: (a) the upper castes, (b) the middle castes (also called the Other Backward Classes, or the OBCs, after independence), and (c) the Dalits ("untouchable" in the past). The upper castes had the "highest" professions: they were priests, scholars, warriors, landlords and businessmen. Peasants and artisans roughly constituted the middle castes. And the Dalits had the "lowest" professions, essentially waste cleaning, leather work, alcohol making, and unskilled agricultural labor.

This was not a voluntary division of labor. It was ascriptive, segregated and tightly regulated. Intermarriage was prohibited and temple access limited. If violated, the social order, often legally buttressed, was enforced with violence. Moreover, middle castes and the Dalits had very little access to education. The upper castes, never more than 15-18 per cent of the population, had a preponderant share of land, education, and income. And when the modern public services came, the upper castes also had an

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<sup>6</sup> Another Cambridge educated political giant of Asia, Lee Kwan Yew, argued very differently, saying democracy at low levels of income devalues merit and promotes both mediocrity and chaos.

<sup>7</sup> Nehru 1942, 528

<sup>8</sup> Nehru 1948, 67

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Smith 1958, 46.

overwhelming presence in the upper reaches of administration. In Madras Presidency, a large province of British India, Brahmins were a mere 3 per cent of the population, but in the 1910s and 1920s, they “comprised something like 70-80 per cent of graduates and native holders of gazetted appointments.”<sup>10</sup> More such examples can be given.

How should a democracy handle the problem of the upper caste domination of education and public services? Were only the upper castes meritorious? If not, how should one include the excluded segments of society, weighed down by the caste system?

As early as the 1950s, India started struggling with these questions. Much was done, which will be summarized later. But in 1980, the Mandal Commission, set up by the government, articulated the problem in a manner that has become classic. The Mandal articulation is worth noting at length.

“It is argued that by selecting candidates with ‘lower merit’ .. the nation (will be) deprived of the services of the best talent that is available to it....

This line of argument, though plausible on the face of it, suffers from a serious fallacy regarding the nature of ‘merit’. We shall try to illustrate this point by a homely example. Mohan comes from a fairly well-off middle-class family and both his parents are well educated. He attends one of the good ... schools in the city which provides a wide range of extra-curricular activities. At home, he has a separate room to himself and he is assisted in his studies by both his parents. There is a television .. set in the house and his father also subscribes to a number of magazines. .... Most of his friends are of a similar background. .... Some of his relatives are fairly influential people and he can bank on the right sort of recommendation .. at the right moment.

On the other hand, Lallu is a village boy, and his backward class parents occupy a low social position in the village caste hierarchy. His father owns a 4-acre plot of agricultural land. Both his parents are illiterate and his family of eight lives huddled in a two-room hut. Whereas a primary school is located in the village, for his high school he had to walk a distance of nearly three kilometers both ways. Keen on pursuing higher studies, he persuaded his parents to send him to an uncle (in a nearby town)... . He never received any guidance regarding the course of studies .. nor the career to be chosen. Most of his friends did not study beyond the middle school ... . . . . Owing to his rural background he has a rustic appearance. Despite his college education, his pronunciation is poor, his manners awkward and he lacks self-confidence. ....

Let us suppose that both of them (appear in) the all-India Services Examination, and Mohan secures 50% more marks than Lallu. Does it mean that Mohan’s merit is 50% higher ... ? Is it possible to determine ..how these boys would have fared in case they had exchanged places? If merit also includes grit, determination, ability to fight odds, etc., should not the marks obtained by Mohan and Lallu be suitably moderated in view of the privileges enjoyed by the former and the handicaps suffered by the latter?

...What we call ‘merit’ in an elitist society is an amalgam of native endowments and environmental privileges. Mohan and Lallu are not equals. .... The conscience of civilized society and the dictates of social justice demand that “merit’ and “equality’ are not turned into a fetish and the element of privilege is duly recognized and discounted for when ‘unequals’ are made to run the same race.”<sup>11</sup>

This formulation was accepted by the government. It was also endorsed by the Supreme Court, when Mandal’s recommendations were challenged by those who thought it was deeply unjust to the meritorious among the upper castes. Since then, India’s higher public education and public services have become “fifty fifty”. Half of the slots in colleges and universities and jobs in the public sector and civil

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<sup>10</sup> David Washbrook, “Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu”, in Francine Frankel and MSA Rao, eds, 1989, *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 212. Gazetted appointees were the high officials of the government. Washbrook adds that “96 per cent of the population was illiterate in English and hence scarcely in position to compete for higher education and senior government jobs.” (ibid)

<sup>11</sup>Mandal Commission Report 1980, 23.

services (49.5%, to be precise) are now reserved for the lower castes.<sup>12</sup> The other half is “open” and fully competitive.

In the private sector, the story is different. There is no affirmative action “reservations” yet. In principle, the sector is entirely based on merit. We don’t have enough studies to ascertain its caste basis yet. The studies that do study corporate discrimination suggest that subtle forms of caste- (and religion-based) discrimination exist in the private formal sector,<sup>13</sup> but there are no legally enforceable quotas.

It is not clear how long the private sector will remain uninfluenced by the political trends. After 1991, as India embraced markets and moved away from central planning, it is the private sector which has flourished more than the public sector. That is where more jobs will be created in the future, too. Will such jobs not be subjected to affirmative action laws at some point? No one can be sure. Much depends on what happens to the power of lower castes in democratic politics, how they organize themselves, and whether the political parties representing their interests come to power and push in that direction. Affirmative action battles are not over in India’s politics and political economy.

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<sup>12</sup> In 1952, in accordance with their demographic proportions, a 22.5% reservation was made for the Dalits and Scheduled Tribes in Central government services. Acceptance of the Mandal Commission report led to the addition of another 27% for the middle castes. Some southern states, it might be noted, had reserved 66-67% in higher education and government services in the 1960s. At this point, the Supreme Court has drawn the ceiling at 49.5%. Until legally or constitutionally altered, no state can go above that ceiling any more.

<sup>13</sup> Sukhdeo Thorat and Katherine Newman, eds, 2010, *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination and Social Exclusion in India*, New York: Oxford University Press.

## 2 ELITE TALENT SERVING REMOTE LOCATIONS: A STUDY OF THE INDIAN ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES

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**Professor Raj Choudhury**, *Assistant Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School*

In India and other developing countries, vigorous policy debate has centered around whether elite talent creates value for civil society. Detractors cite high migration rates of elites to the west (“brain drain”) to question why public resources should be used to educate talent at elite institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology. However recent literature has pointed out that brain drain does not accurately characterize the value created by migration of elites and has focused on the phenomenon of brain circulation (Saxenian 2005). Kapur (2010) documents other externalities related to the migration of elites: he argues that positive selection of Indian migrants through education has strengthened India's democracy by creating a political space for previously excluded social groups. Whether or not the migration of elites helps or hurts countries such as India, the fact remains that in large measure, elites remain disconnected from workplaces and populations in remote parts of the country. Hospitals, schools and firms based in rural or semi-urban India face shortages in attracting elite talent. In this context, the question I have studied relates to incentives of elite talent to work in remote locations. If such employment, even for a short stint, can create value for the individual, larger number of elites would be incentivized to work in remote locations. Over time this would lessen inequalities in labor supply across local labor markets and would create value for firms, public entities and the population based in rural India.

My empirical study (Chattopadhyay and Choudhury, “*Sink or Swim: The Role of Workplace Context in Shaping Career Advancement and Human-Capital Development*,” *Organization Science*, 2017) focuses on the assignment of bureaucrats working with the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) to remote locations across India. IAS is the administrative service branch of the Civil Services of the Government of India. An IAS career is among the most prestigious in India. Individuals enter the IAS after college graduation by taking a highly competitive and challenging three-part examination. According to 2013 results, 776,565 candidates took the Civil Services examination and 1,078 were finally accepted, a final acceptance rate of approximately one successful candidate in 1,000. Selection into the IAS is followed by a training period, after which individuals are assigned to “cadres,” or the states in which they will spend much of their careers. Entry-level IAS officers are assigned to administrative positions at the district level. After completing training, new IAS officers are responsible for managing their districts, supervising subordinate officers, maintaining law and order, and implementing national-level development policies within their districts.

I examine how the degree of “challenge” embedded in the location that the individual is assigned to within a firm affect their productivity and career progression. We argue that early-career individuals assigned to “challenging” locations—those characterized by high levels of uncertainty and threat arising from external adversity—will experience faster short-term career advancement than those in less challenging contexts, due to two mechanisms: more opportunity to develop skills and high motivation to relocate via promotion. We test our propositions empirically using rich personnel data and a natural experiment. The Indian Administrative Services deploys entry-level managers quasi-randomly across India. Given this assignment protocol, we find that managers deployed to challenging geographic contexts (measured by the district crime rate) early in their careers experience more rapid short-term career advancement and continue to experience faster advancement over the long term. Doubling of the crime rate is associated with a 10% reduction in time until the next promotion. Evidence from field interviews suggests that challenging contexts provide managers more opportunities to develop problem-solving skills.

Our results inform recent policy initiative in India related to allocating elite talent to remote regions. On January 31, 2018, the Government of India made a policy announcement related to deploying over 1,200 graduates from premier institutions like IITs and NITs to teach in 53 state-run engineering

colleges in backward areas across 11 states and Union Territories for three years.<sup>14</sup> Our findings indicate that allocating elite talent to work in rural locations might be a “win-win” for the individual and civil society if it leads to longer-term human capital development for the individual.

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<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/1200-iit-nit-graduates-to-teach-engineering-students-in-backward-areas-javadekar/articleshow/62727569.cms>

### 3 MEASURING EXCELLENCE AND INFLUENCE IN UNIVERSITIES

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What constitutes excellence in higher education? What distinguishes the world's leading universities? How are their faculty recruited, retained, and promoted, and what are the metrics for defining leading-edge scholarship? By what processes are students admitted? How are "world-class" universities defined in governance? How do universities and national systems of higher education learn from one another? And how do the multiple, competing systems of rankings and league tables endeavor to measure and rank universities across geographies and political systems? Particular attention will be paid to the recent rise of Chinese universities in global league tables.

A background note designed to begin the conversation will be dispersed on Friday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, during the Workshop.

## 4 MERIT AND CASTE

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**Professor Ajantha Subramanian**, *Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies, Harvard University*

In India today, “merit” is a ubiquitous term that generates a lot of political heat. Over the post-independence period, it has come to reference forms of caste distinction that have a much longer social life. The relationship between merit and caste is debated in a variety of arenas but none more vocally and consistently than engineering education. Engineering education in India took off after independence as part of the state’s technologically oriented model of national development. Initially, training in engineering was principally a state effort but, from the early 1990s, many private actors entered this lucrative field.

Within the world of Indian engineering education, there is a recognized hierarchy of institutions. Those considered most “meritocratic” are the Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs, which are also the focus of my research. Over the post-independence period, the IITs have become the most coveted institutions of higher education. The Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) to gain admission to the IITs is held every year in April and is a hotly anticipated event. Since the exam was first held in 1960, the number of candidates has grown steadily with over a million students taking the exam in 2017 and under 3% getting admission to the now 23 IITs. Every year, exam “toppers” become instant celebrities, with their faces and “All India Ranks” splashed over newspapers and billboards. The success of the IITs has also spawned a massive coaching industry to train students for the JEE. With key outposts in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, coaching centers now admit students from as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> grade who spend up to five years mastering a single exam. That families are willing to invest the money to send children to coaching centers speaks volumes about the anticipated payoff.

Over the post-independence period, the “IITian” has become exemplary of Indian merit. What gets obscured in public assessments of the IITian’s innate intelligence and competitiveness are the accumulated social advantages that have enabled admission to the IITs. The majority of IITians come from high caste families of bureaucrats, schoolteachers, and academics where social capital has long been held in education. While arguably from middle class backgrounds, the value of their educational capital has spiked due to the reorganization of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism around the “knowledge economy.” Now, IIT graduates join companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Shell Oil, Tata Consultancy Services, or Infosys for starting salaries that are considerably higher than what their parents earned at the end of a lifetime of work. Significantly, and despite the IITs’ reputation as top-tier engineering colleges, most IITians have left engineering altogether in favor of more lucrative careers in computer science, finance, and management.

What we are seeing, then, is the reproduction of caste through a highly stratified system of technical education and professional tracking. At the same time, the role of caste in the makeup of the IITs has been obscured in favor of their portrayal as casteless meritocracies. Moreover, attempts at opening up these institutions to low castes through quotas, or reservations as they are known in India, are consistently met with fervent opposition, not in the name of caste, but in the name of preserving “merit.” This was the case in 1973 when a 22.5 percent quota was implemented for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and in 2006 when a 27 percent quota was implemented for Other Backward Classes. While the leveraging of meritocracy against redistributive justice is not limited to the Indian context, here, the public debate around merit is particularly shrill. In part, this has to do with the intense competition for seats in the more desirable educational institutions. It also has to do with how the constitutional language of redress has framed popular discourse around merit and caste in India.



Within the constitutional assembly debates leading up to independence, caste was widely regarded as a part of Indian social organization that would and should be abolished with social progress. At the same time, there was a stated commitment to redress for those groups who were historically disadvantaged by the institution of caste. Paradoxically, the very language of redress ended up reinforcing the idea of high castes as casteless and meritorious. We see this clearly within reservations policy where only the historically disadvantaged are named as castes whereas the historically privileged appear simply as the “general category” of casteless, individual citizens.

Within the educational domain, the correlation between the “general category” and castelessness becomes even more charged when you consider the other term for “the general category:” “merit-based” admissions. The equivalence between the general, the casteless, and the meritorious reinforces the idea that those who fall within the general category do so, not on the basis of accumulated caste advantages, but simply by virtue of their merit. This distinction between the general/meritorious/casteless and the reserved/unmeritorious/caste-based has profoundly shaped the debate around educational equality in India. It has allowed those who fall within the general category to argue that it is the reservations system, and not historical caste privilege that generates inequality and undermines the modern democratic ideal of equal citizenship.

Such distinctions between the meritorious and the reserved do not account for the starkly unequal caste histories of literacy, education, and white-collar employment that have made the Indian socioeconomic landscape anything but a level playing field. It bears mentioning that, 71 years after independence, most “centers of excellence” that, until recently were exempt from quotas, continue to be overwhelmingly high caste in composition. This is equally the case in the most rapidly expanding spaces of private sector employment, such as IT, with its largely high caste managerial class. These patterns reveal the enduring salience of caste as an indicator of success and the fallacy of defining merit as an innate, individual trait.

There are two key takeaways from this research. First is the role of technical education in caste formation. Rather than a space of universal knowledge where caste is no longer relevant, what we are seeing is the reconstitution of caste within and through the technical sciences. What this suggests is that caste is both resilient within and foundational to the makeup of the most modern, apparently identity-free institutions. Second is how we understand the relationship between meritocracy and democracy. By bracketing out historically accumulated advantages and disadvantages, the notion of meritocracy, like that of a color-blind society, has come to service the reproduction of inequality. Of course, the ideal meaning of meritocracy as a system which corrects for historical privilege has not vanished. However, the divergence between its ideal meaning and its social life should call into question the easy assumption that meritocracy is indeed a leveler of opportunity.

## 5 MERITOCRACY AND CHINA

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**Professor Peter K. Bol**, *Vice Provost for Advances in Learning, Harvard University*; *Charles H. Carswell Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University*

What is merit? I shall ask this in the context of the great change in bureaucratic recruitment during China's middle period, from the latter half of the eighth century (after the An Lushan rebellion) into the early fifteenth (the reign of the Yongle emperor). Most simply put this was the shift in qualifying men for office from pedigree to written examinations. It begins with the medieval oligarchy of "great clans," or the "shi clans" *shizu* 士族, who traced their ancestry back centuries and had outlived every dynasty since the Later Han, who maintained residences and graveyards along the capital corridor between Chang'an and Luoyang, whose status was recognized by the court's ranked list of great clans, who intermarried, who occupied court offices, who controlled the offices that assigned official positions, and whose literary court culture defined a national culture. It ends with the later imperial literati *shiren* 士人 (some would prefer "gentry"), who were dispersed through the prefectures and counties, who belonged to lineages whose genealogies defined them as descendants of the apical ancestor who had first moved to this locale (the *shiqianzu* 始遷祖), who were registered in schools and competed in multiple levels of examinations, who possessed a legal status and concomitant privileges tied to the level of their achievement in the hierarchy of examinations, and whose mastery of Neo-Confucian moral philosophy defined a national culture. This transformation has been seen as marking the moment when the bureaucratic state became a "meritocracy" and when social mobility (upward into the elite and downward from the elite) became a feature of China's society.

Let us take merit to mean the possession of that which justifies the granting of political privilege. Meritocracy would then be a system in which people are selected to serve on the basis of merit. But if this is the definition, then I think the question we ought to be asking is how and why the shared understanding of merit changed. Members of great clans thought they indeed possessed greater merit than others and so did later literati, but what they meant by merit was not the same. We should avoid the trap of accepting the ideological claim of the literati that it was the individual's possession of learning in contrast to family status that made them literati and thus that for the first time in history a meritocratic society had emerged. I propose to problematize both the great clan claim to privilege by birth and the literati claim to privilege by learning.

In the Tang (618-907) bureaucratic system there were multiple means to gain the status necessary to be eligible for appointment. Schools and exams were part of this, but so were positions in the guards and appointments to the senior clerical staff. Kinship with an office holder of higher rank was possibly the most important. Moreover, there were two bureaucratic appointment tracks: court and country. In contrast to later dynasties, in which the initial appointment was almost always to a local government post, in Tang one could be appointed immediately to a court office and, aside from a stint as a prefect (*ceshi* 策史), spend one's career at court. Local offices below the position of prefect were, it appears, staffed by men who spent their careers in the province. Moreover, again in contrast to Song (960-1279) and later periods when a graduate of the examinations (overseen by the Ministry of Rites) would automatically receive official rank and an appointment, in Tang all appointments were made by the Ministry of Personnel. An examination graduate in Tang was not guaranteed appointment; his file went to Personnel which proceeded to administer its own test.

On the face of it the qualification examination at the Tang Ministry of Personnel seems to have been intended to sort out men of good breeding. It was less an examination than an assessment of four qualities: appearance, speech, calligraphy and proper written expression (in writing a judicial judgment), and – all else being equal – one's achievements (*gong* 功). Presumably this was the assessment on first

entry, further appointments would have been based on rules of seniority and the regular merit ratings of officials.

It is harder to imagine an assessment more geared toward how one was born than one that credited how one looked, spoke and wrote. However, great clans were collaborative social enterprises that required constant effort and investment to survive. They had to educate their offspring to maintain themselves as the repository of cultural and statecraft knowledge, they had to secure appropriate marriage partners, and they had to secure placements for some proportion of their male descendants. The Tang conception a genealogy was rather different from the later lineage conception in which ideally all descendants of an apical ancestor were included; in Tang applicants for office had to submit a claim to patrilineal descent from ancestors of renown, and this would be checked by a government genealogy office. In order to submit such a claim the candidate would still have to exhibit the appropriate personal qualities.

Tang writers did distinguish between qualities that were inborn and those that were acquired. Some held that the ability to behave according to ethical standards was a function of breeding; it was in the blood. But this was not so for cultural qualities: historical and Classical knowledge, writing, speech, ritual, law and methods of governance. The argument has been made, and in general I agree, that by making acquired cultural attributes crucial to a career, the great clans opened the way to talented outsiders. In the late eighth century this argument was made explicitly, also by people of great clan background. The emergence of the concept of the civil/literary (*wen* 文) as an overarching concept that showed how the goal of political renewal through civil government could be linked to a definition of personal cultural accomplishment is a sign of this intellectual shift as well.

Before the rebellion the court had occasionally adjusted the clan rankings to include those who had served the dynasty well; after the rebellion, with the rise of provincial governors who claimed the power of appointment, the court apparently stopped ranking the great clans entirely. Perhaps pedigree would have disappeared gradually as a qualification for office, particularly as examinations had already begun to play a larger role in recruitment and assignment, but the evidence taken as a whole points to a different reason for the end of the medieval oligarchy: the extermination of the capital corridor elite during the Huang Chao rebellion of 881-884.

When the examination system was expanded into the primary means of recruitment in the late tenth century it was aimed at recruiting *shi* as the surviving educated elite in a world that had been dominated for a century by military men. Following Tang precedent it was a test of *wen* and privileged those who most proficient in poetic composition (not the Confucian Classics) as evidence for an active command of culture. Soon this definition of merit was attacked on two fronts. On one side those who thought that state institutions should be reformed so as to guide society, economy and culture argued for testing writing that articulated how the ideal society of antiquity (as interpreted through the Confucian Classics) could be realized in the present. Service in government should be reserved for literati with ideas about how to use institutions to transform society, rather than poetic skill. To put teeth behind this, the court required that examination candidates be products of the state school system. On the other side were those who held that what truly mattered was individual moral cultivation. The grounds for this had a certain correspondence with the aristocratic assumption that ethical behavior was not something acquired but in the blood, so to speak. Except now the (Neo-Confucian) claim was that all people, as biological beings that were part of the greater system of life in the universe, possessed the same inborn moral nature and could through effort realize it in practice, whereas literary ability was a talent only some possessed. Merit lay in the degree of one's success in moral cultivation. It could be assessed by teachers and friends, but there was no written test that could be relied upon to prove one's moral accomplishment. They objected also to social transformation through institutional means on the grounds that state institutions motivated behavior through reward and punishment and thus encouraged self-interested and, by their definition, immoral behavior.

These divisions in literati views of merit – having ideas for an activist state, possessing cultural accomplishment, and pursuing moral cultivation – were hard to reconcile. The initial compromise had three parts. First, there was a general turning away from efforts to expand the role of state institutions due to two factors: rural elite resistance to the loss of their mediating role between the tax-paying population and government and the priority given national defense from the 1120s until the Mongol conquest in the 1270s. Second, the examination system continued along two tracks: a literary track that resumed testing poetic composition and a Classics track that tested interpretations of any one of the Five Classics. Third, the Neo-Confucians continued to spread their teachings through “discoursing on learning” at private academies, but without trying to persuade students not to take part in the exams. It was not until 1315, when the examinations were reopened under the Mongols’ Yuan dynasty, that an integrated solution was established: literati would be examined for their ability to articulate the philosophy found in the Neo-Confucian interpretation of the Four Books (the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*). In short, they were tested for their literary ability to articulate Neo-Confucian moral ideas.

Although great faith had been placed in the examination system in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, this trajectory did not continue. Officials developed ways of privileging their offspring in the examinations and, more effectively, they made ever greater use of the right to “protect” descendants to make them eligible for appointment. Yet despite this the number of participants in the examination system continued to grow, constantly reducing the chances of success (by the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century as many 450,000 were competing in a system that awarded 600 regular degrees once every three years). Although during the Yuan recruitment was negligible, schooling continued and possibly expanded. By this point it had become apparent that the social function of examinations and schools had trumped their recruitment function; they had become an expensive but low risk means by which families secured an identity as literati. The conversion of well-to-do local families into literati did not happen uniformly across the landscape. In some places (particularly in Fujian, Zhejiang, southern Jiangsu and Jiangxi) sustained efforts were made by literati educators to persuade rich families to educate their sons and join in the literati community. In some places there is little evidence that this was happening.

The early Ming dynasty tried to gain control over the burgeoning numbers of literati, limiting the number of stipended school students (licentiates) and eventually creating various degree statuses. Despite these efforts at control, in the early fifteenth century the court gave in to literati demands for formal recognition and allowed non-stipended (but still tax-advantaged) supplementary school students. Their numbers continued to grow, reaching perhaps 800,000 by the seventeenth century, prompting some statecraft theorists to call for a formal division between the social and recruitment functions of the examination system.

It is reasonable to suppose that the examination system was able to recruit talented men into government. But it seems to me that the important story was the creation, beginning in the Song period, of an expanding national pool of local literati who shared a similar education and from which officials were recruited. Moreover it was an education that was founded on an ideology of personal integrity, rather than state-building. This pool perpetuated itself to the degree that it could. The practice of partible inheritance served as a brake on self-perpetuation and it was the inability of poor literati to maintain their advantages that opened up opportunities for new wealth to join the ranks of the literati elite.

## 6 SELECTION MECHANISMS AND MERITOCRACY IN A HIERARCHICAL AND UNEQUAL SOCIETY: INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The principles of nondiscrimination that seemingly eschews the effects of ascriptive characteristics (such as class, caste, race and gender) and an ostensible level playing field that signal a certain kind of equality associated with the idea of meritocracy, make it attractive as a mechanism of breaking down established hierarchies of hereditary privilege. A system where opportunities and responsibilities are allocated on the basis of merit rather than patronage or identity, and where rewards are commensurate with talent and competence, seems to promote not just social justice but also greater systemic efficiency.

However, in unequal societies with unequal access to opportunity, meritocratic principles of selection can amplify instead of attenuate inequality. As one of the world's most socially stratified societies, India has struggled with using exams as the means to implement meritocratic selection into higher education and the public sector, while using quotas to mitigate the deep inequalities in opportunity that are rife in Indian society. The discussion note examines this tension by examining data on selection into the country's most competitive federally financed higher education institutions.

In India – as in other societies – education has been an important ladder of social mobility, with performance in exams the sole metric of merit. Other plausible measures commensurate with the concept of meritocracy, such as talent or creativity, have not been in the picture, primarily because of the difficulties of measuring at scale. Below I discuss the tension between access and inclusion on the one hand and exam based meritocracy on the other.

Access to college, first of all, requires enrolment in high school. Higher secondary enrolment rates of India's low castes, tribals and women have surged in recent years (Table 1) with enrolment of the lowest caste ("scheduled castes") exceeding their share in the population while that of the scheduled tribes has edged closer to their share of the population.

**Table 1. Enrolment in Senior Secondary (Class XI-XII)**

	1980-81 (millions)	Share of total students enrolled (%)	2014-15 (millions)	Share of total students enrolled (%)	Share of Population (%)
SC	1.2	10.9	4.1	17.5	16.6
ST	0.3	2.7	1.5	6.4	8.6
Female	3.4	30.9	11.1	47.2	
Total	11	100	23.5	100	

Enrolment in high school is necessary but not sufficient to get into college. The necessary condition is completing high school. Table 2 gives data on the share of those who are enrolled in high school and go on to complete high school.

**Table 2. High School (Higher Secondary) Examination Pass Percentages by Social Group**

Year	All Students	Scheduled Caste	Scheduled Tribe	Gender Parity
2005	71.5	60.7	57.4	
2010	76.2	70.3	66.5	0.88
2015	79.2	76.6	68.9	1.01

But if completing high school allows one to avail of higher education, what field of higher education and which specific institution one can actually attend, is an entirely different question. In aggregate numbers Indian higher education has increased nearly 100-fold since independence from less than 0.4 million students in 1950 to nearly 36 million students in 2016-17. One major consequence of the dramatic expansion has been increased access, especially to hitherto excluded social groups.<sup>15</sup> Unequal representation in Indian higher education can be measured either as a stock variable (the college educated as a proportion of the underlying population), a flow variable (the college educated as a proportion of those in the college-going age cohort) or a flow variable conditional on completing high school. The unequal representation in Indian higher education is increasingly largely due to inequalities at the lower rungs of the education ladder and only secondarily due to unequal access to tertiary education per se.<sup>16</sup>

But since the vast majority of Indian higher educational institutions are of dubious quality, accessing the small minority of institutions that signal quality, requires stringent – if crude – selection mechanisms. In India this takes place in the form of nationwide entrance exams to the coveted federal government institutions in engineering (23 Indian Institutes of Technology), medicine (7 All India Institutes of Medical Sciences), management (19 Indian Institutes of Management) and Law (18 National Law Schools), supplemented by another set of exams for the next tier of professional schools (such as the 31 National Institutes of Technology or the 460 Medical Colleges and 136 Dental Colleges).

The relationship between standardized tests and social inequality is a complex one.<sup>17</sup> Standardized testing has been deployed for multiple purposes ranging from diagnostic purposes to accountability to gatekeeping. There are debates whether these tests measure achievement or ability and which is a better indicator of future academic performance. Its proponents have argued that standardized tests provide at least a partial antidote to rigid social hierarchies and open doors to students from less privileged backgrounds, not just the children of the elite. Critics have countered that standardized test scores largely reflect socioeconomic privilege since children from more privileged backgrounds can boost their results with expensive private test preparation courses. The evidence in the U.S suggests that standardized tests don't necessarily amplify social stratification but instead seem to reflect the academic advantages that go with socioeconomic privilege since the results of standardized tests are affected by levels of learning, cognitive ability, and opportunity to learn.

To counter the structural privileges of the upper castes, India adopted a selection process that combined the results of performance in standardized tests with quotas for socially marginalized groups. Quotas in higher education has been contentious issue in India since independence and triggered the first amendment to the Indian constitution even as the ink was barely dry. In 1951 a Brahmin girl was denied admission to a medical college in Madras even though she had scored sufficient marks. The student appealed to the Supreme Court claiming she had been discriminated only based on her birth (caste). The

<sup>15</sup> Devesh Kapur. 2017. "Liberalization sans liberalism: The Control Raj and the Perils of Ideology and Rents in Higher Education," in Rakesh Mohan (ed.), *India Transformed: 25 Years of Economic Reforms*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

<sup>16</sup> Basant, Rakesh and Sen, Gitanjali. 2014. Access to Higher Education in India: An Exploration of Its Antecedents Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2535644>

<sup>17</sup> Eric Grodsky, John Robert Warren and Erika Felts. 2008. Testing and Social Stratification in American Education *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 34: 385-404.

Court agreed and struck down the Madras government order.<sup>18</sup> Major agitations broke out in the state and the resulting pressure forced India’s first constitutional amendment even before the Lok Sabha had been formed. The amendment (adding Clause 4 to Section 15 of the Constitution) now read: “Nothing in this Article or in Clause 2 of Article 29 shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.”

The unambiguity implied in “nothing” combined with sufficient ambiguity of the term “socially and educationally backward classes” meant that the social reengineering that began in Madras province gradually spread to the rest of the country over the next half century. The confluence of identity and redistributive politics meant that higher education – the erstwhile preserve of India’s upper castes – would inevitably become the battle ground of politics, especially as the “silent revolution” empowering lower castes gathered force. Since then, the challenge of access and inclusion has been in perennial tension with notions of “meritocracy”.

The effects of meritocracy in a highly unequal society can be quite debilitating. Simple minded beliefs that an organization or its policies are merit-based makes it easier to overlook the subconscious operation of bias. In India “meritocracy has underpinned an ideology of great inequality..[and] people at the top believed that those at the top deserved what they had. They deserved it, in part, because they rose by the dint of their own talent. There is an odd sense in which privilege has to justify itself, but merit does not. It is perhaps easier to shame an aristocracy than a meritocracy because the taint of undeserved wealth hovers over them. Since the idea of equality of opportunity in education is so aligned with the idea of meritocracy (or rather the two legitimize each other), education is often not seen as the locus of equality.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, the high degree of tolerance that democracies have for inequality might, in some part, be due to the legitimizing myth of meritocracy.

India’s attempts to stitch the twin fabrics of standardized test based admissions with quotas for weaker sections of society are evident in admissions to the elite undergraduate professional higher educational institutions where a tiny fraction of students applying can hope to be admitted (Table 3)

**Table 3. Elite Institutional Admission Likelihood Based on Examination (2016/17)**

Exam Name	Candidates Appeared	Seats Available	Applicant to seat ratio
NEET (all medical colleges)	731,223	79,355	0.11
Medical: AIIMSs	284,737	700	0.0025
Management: IIMs (CAT)	195,000	4,000	0.02
Engineering: IITs (JEE)	1,128,636	10,572	0.009
Law: NLU's (CLAT)	42,000	1,154	0.027

<sup>18</sup> Champakam Dorairajan challenged a Government Order issued by the government of Madras Province (as it was then called), earmarking admission of students to Engineering and Medical Colleges of the State strictly on the following basis: of every 14 seats, 6 were to be allotted to Non-Brahmin (Hindus), 2 to Backward Hindus, 2 to Brahmins, 2 to Harijans, 1 to Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians and 1 to Muslims.

<sup>19</sup> Pratap Bhanu Mehta. 2011. ‘Meritocracy and its Discontents,’ 4 NUJS L. Rev. 5.

An example of the extremely selectivity – an indicator of meritocratic selection with all its limitations – is evident when comparing the students intakes into the military academies of India (National Defense Academy, NDA) and the United States (West Point) in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. Army Officer Selection: India’s NDA and US West Point Academy (Annual Average 2012-14)**

Country of Service	Applied	Admitted	Admitted to Applicant Ratio
India (NDA)	197985	553	0.003
USA (West Point)	15,213	1,202	0.079

While there are no caste based quotas in the military academies, in order to give students from lower castes a leg-up in all other elite higher education institutions, the entrance exams mandate a lower cut off for students from these communities (Table 5).

**Table 5. Exam Cut Off Scores for Elite Higher Education Institutions**

Exam Name	Total Marks	UR	OBC	SC	ST
NEET	720	360	288	288	288
CAT	300	90	80	75	75
JEE	360	81	49	32	27

But a simple ascriptive identity like caste is but one indicator of being under-privileged. There are multiple axes of deprivation that shape educational outcomes such as place of schooling, parental income or parental education. Data based on students qualifying the JEE exam for the Indian Institutes of Technology in 2014, indicates that while socio-economic privilege matters, the exams also provide a meritocratic pathway for students from less privileged backgrounds whether based on place of schooling (Table 6), parental income (Table 7) or parental education (Table 8).

**Table 6. IIT Entrants: Distribution of Candidates According to Place of Schooling**

Higher Secondary Schooling From	Registered	Qualified	%Registered	%Qualified
City	85,937	20,636	67.67	76
Town	24,468	3,862	19.27	14.22
Village	16,590	2,654	13.06	9.77
<b>Total</b>	<b>126,995</b>	<b>27,152</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>



**Table 7. IIT Entrants: Distribution of Candidates According to Parental Income**

<b>Income</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Registered</b>	<b>Qualified</b>	<b>%Registered</b>	<b>%Qualified</b>
-	No Data	16,754	3,282	13.19	12.09
1	UPTO 100,000	36,070	5,063	28.4	18.56
2	RS. 100001 -200000	16,179	2,975	12.74	10.96
3	RS. 200001 - 300000	14,161	2,921	11.15	10.76
4	RS. 300001 -400000	11,986	2,735	9.44	10.07
5	RS. 400001 -500000	9,906	2,645	7.8	9.74
6	RS. 500001-600000	6,693	2,014	5.27	7.42
7	RS. 600001-700000	3,300	1,091	2.6	4.02
8	RS. 700001-800000	2,518	840	1.98	3.09
9	RS. 800001 AND ABOVE	9,428	3,586	7.42	13.21
<b>Total</b>		<b>126,995</b>	<b>27,152</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 8. IIT Entrants: Distribution of Candidates According to Educational Qualification of Parents**

<b>Father's Qualification</b>	<b>Registered</b>	<b>Qualified</b>	<b>%Registered</b>	<b>%Qualified</b>
Blank	14,306	2,730	11.3	10.1
Illiterate	5,832	668	4.6	2.5
Matriculate	25,254	3,672	19.9	13.5
Graduate	48,245	11,414	38	42.0
Post Graduate	24,832	7,156	19.6	26.4
Others	8,526	1,512	6.7	5.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>126,995</b>	<b>27,152</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The data presents a mixed picture of the Indian government's attempts to balance the elitism of meritocracy with affirmative action rampways to facilitate those at the bottom of the social pyramid to rise to the apex of an academic pyramid. The effects of these policies on higher education have been extremely contentious, from its supposed 'crowding out' effects on better-prepared students from non-reserved categories, to the possible effects on less well-prepared students in the reserved categories in elite institutions. However, a study of affirmative action in engineering colleges in Maharashtra finds that the policy has had positive impacts, increasing attendance among targeted students, improved results in exams and with little adverse effects on graduation rates, especially for SC, ST and women, but less for OBCs.<sup>20</sup>

However, the fierce attention given to quotas and its effects on merit based selection may have distorted other long-term interventions. Whether quotas are in fact the best and most effective means to promote access to marginalized young Indians, and whether they have substituted for other fundamental interventions from improving children's health that can impact cognitive abilities or the poor quality of primary education, is a contentious issue, but one that needs more attention.

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<sup>20</sup> Surendrakumar Bagde, Dennis Epple and Lowell Taylor. 2016. 'Does Affirmative Action Work? Caste, Gender, College Quality, and Academic Success in India', *American Economic Review* 106 (6): 1495–1521.

## **7 POLITICS AND THE PROBLEM OF INEQUALITY IN CHINA: MERITOCRACY AND EGALITARIANISM IN NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL PLANNING, 1949-2018**

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Since 1949, China's educational system has been shaped by a shifting mix of domestic and international influences—a mix that has changed radically in concert with broader political discourses and evolving national development priorities. This chapter will analyze key education policy and planning documents from the inception of the People's Republic of China up to the present time, to reveal changing notions of inequality, egalitarianism, and meritocracy evident in the educational priorities set out for the country.

The chapter will begin to set the stage by describing early 20th century educational influences and philosophies in China. It will then move to the main analysis. The chapter will define the following post-1949 eras: the socialist building period, the Great Leap, retrenchment, the Cultural Revolution, modernization and market transition, and globalization. For each period, the chapter will analyze key policy and planning documents to illuminate underlying conceptions of the problem of inequality and ideals of meritocracy and egalitarianism. Throughout, the role of domestic and international educational influences will be considered.