

# Sociologising Merit

*Merit is part of a discourse generated in a highly stratified society, which affirms society's faith in the possibility of social mobility. Merit legitimises the privileges and rewards obtained and sought after by the upwardly mobile. At the same time, it is also part of an assumption and acceptance of inequalities between people and thence of the unequal distribution of resources. As a myth of modern India, it has historically legitimised equality, while at the same time obstructing it. The sociology of education helps map the duality of this myth. It also grounds a rethinking of merit, for a fuller expression of freedom, equality and excellence in society.*

AMMAN MADAN

The notion of merit has been at the centre of several controversies in recent years. The recent upheavals over the extension of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) have again focused on the issue of denial of merit. There is a well known dictum that it is through the study of madness that one gets the best possible insights into the deep structures and conflicts of a society. The heated and passionate declarations of violence having been done to merit and of the need to protect it offer an insight into the way this particular concept is being predominantly interpreted. This paper aims at examining its meaning in a society which has a strong presence of values of equality and freedom while at the same time being highly stratified.

My main argument here is that merit is a component of a discourse emerging from the stratified societies that have a widely held faith in the possibility of social mobility. It is part of a discourse that legitimises striving and hope while at the same time existing in highly unequal realities of opportunity. One that legitimises the privileges and rewards obtained and sought after by the upwardly mobile. It is part of a cultural system of individualism and of the importance of effort. Merit is also linked to the satisfactions and rewards of consumerism which are intrinsic to the changing meaning of work and employment in contemporary India. At the same time, merit is part of an assumption and acceptance of inequalities between people and of the unequal distribution of resources. Paradoxically, as a myth of modern India, it celebrates equality while at the same time opposing it.

## Capabilities and Their Conversion into Abilities

It is held that there is a certain biological substratum which defines human capabilities, which get differentially activated or developed into human abilities through a variety of cultural experiences. This is in sharp contrast with a common traditional view of human abilities: that some have a state of grace, which gives them special qualities that last throughout life, while the rest, lacking that state of grace, remain at a mediocre level. In other words, the commonsensical view of abilities differentiates between people by assuming that their present state of abilities is stable and can be expected to continue in the same way in the foreseeable future. That sense of stable, constant differences in abilities is sought to be explained in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is linked with the concept of IQ, but more often is simply reduced to thinking in terms of "gifted" and "average" students. Much of the sociology of education, as well as contemporary psychology, has been about emphasising the cultural or environmental dimensions of learning. It is argued that people

have enormous capacities of growth and a quick and inflexible classification of them into lower and higher levels is an act of violence against their possibilities. Yet, the older tendency of seeing human ability as a stable, fixed characteristic remains with us. It gets a good deal of its appeal by being a latent justification of the socially created differences between people.

It may indeed be possible in a few cases that biological attributes may overwhelm what happens after birth. But in most cases, the latter may be far more decisive than the former. Instead of blaming failures on a putative inner lacking, it may be much more useful to search for the lack of merit in the opposite direction.

If the qualities that enable success in examinations are called merit, then clearly a large and necessary component of them is coming from social life. It is useful to make a distinction between capabilities and their conversion into abilities. Sociologists and anthropologists have spoken much about the social dimension of that conversion. Here I shall draw from the sociology of education and will focus on how it can help us understand the character of socially-generated inequality.

## Ideal of a Meritocracy

The question of inequality and education has drawn much attention over the last century. That is hardly surprising since the theme of equality has been central to many social and political movements and to processes that have changed the face of the world over the last two centuries. At the same time, schools have become an important channel for building careers. The ideal of a meritocracy has emerged as a core value of most contemporary states. It expresses strongly egalitarian principles and rejects many ascribed or inherited privileges. Emerging with the overthrow of feudalism in the 18th and 19th centuries it attacked the older mode of acquisition of prestige and wealth. It formed an alternative framework to the older one of inheritance by birth and of the restriction of special positions to certain descent-based or gendered groups. Focusing particularly on appointments to positions of service to the state, it argued that a more valid and legitimate mode than nepotism or bribery was offered by the examination of abilities.

A stiff battle preceded the modern acceptance of the meritocratic principle. In early 19th century in England, an attempt to institute recruitment to the state's bureaucracy through open examinations was thwarted and pushed into the Indian Civil Service (ICS) instead. Thus it was the ICS that was the first to see open examinations, which was a practice that later spread in England only after certain corporations like Unilever began to adopt it for their own recruitments.

The meritocracy's claims to being a superior way of doing things rested on two arguments:

(1) *An argument of efficiency*: The most appropriate candidates were being selected for a given set of jobs, i.e., the tests were accurate and reliable in finding suitable candidates, and the system was not hindered by the uncertainties that might occur through the inheritance of positions.

(2) *An argument of equality*: That the meritorious were not limited to a small pool of people circumscribed by birth and it was the entire population which formed the pool from which the best were picked up.

Further, there was embedded in all this a moral argument: that dignity (and also privilege) ought correctly to be decided not by birth, but by deed. As an organisational principle this was a remarkable change. It expressed some of the most important moral beliefs of modern times: that one is not tied to the origins of one's birth and that it is possible to make one's life through hard work and clear thinking. The prevailing of the meritocratic ideal was a great victory over feudalism and its deep-rooted inequalities. However, there have been problems, too, in this ideal and now with the experience of a couple of centuries behind us, it is much easier to place it in its context.

## Sociologising Merit

The problem of conceptualisation of merit is close to that of understanding the meaning of value, of worth and of goodness. Jürgen Habermas (1984: 3) has pointed out that issues which once seemed to be philosophical or ontological in nature can no longer be seen in a purely conceptual realm. The growth of our understanding of how social contexts affect meanings has led to a shift in the way such categories are to be formulated. Philosophy has to turn to acknowledging its links with reality and the historical, social contexts that create meaning. The sociology of knowledge and the sociology of education, in particular, become central to grasping what merit may be and what its limits are. To learn from it we can begin with the classic study of the place of education in society as was seen to prevail in the US in the 1950s. By reacting to Talcott Parsons' (1959) classic paper 'The School Class as a Social System' we can move into the core of the problem.

Parsons saw society as a system of roles and institutions, held together by norms. Education in American society was believed to play two key functions for society: (1) It socialised young people into the commitments and capabilities of adult roles. (2) It allocated people to suitable positions in society. The basis of allocation, of who eventually got to do what, was stated by Parsons to be merit, or as he put it, "achievement". If we were to believe Parsons, all positions in American society were being allocated on the basis of achievement, which was being tested accurately and reliably in American schools.

While Parsons' formulation was remarkable because of the clarity with which it was able to discuss social structures and what education does in relation to them, at the same time, the problems in this kind of articulation are obvious. It does not correspond to many problems which we know existed in the America of his times and which continue till date – the many ways by which people are held back from educational opportunity because of race, gender and class, for instance. In his paper, Parsons does mention them in passing, but does not really begin to ask what they do to his postulating "achievement" as the basis of allocation of roles.

A strong rebuttal soon developed of the Parsonian depiction of a society where the right people were supposed to be getting the right jobs. While Melvin M. Tumin and others articulated severe repudiations and proposed alternative descriptions of social stratification, it was Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), that became the most celebrated text debunking the myth of justice through education in a liberal democracy. Their basic argument was that there were deep-rooted structural inequalities in capitalist societies which prevented achievement alone from being the main factor in allocation of roles. The character of the roles and their relative proportions in society was defined by capitalism and there were necessarily fewer and fewer positions as one moved up the hierarchy. Schools that were aimed at feeding the economic demands of stratified societies would never be able to lead actually to equality. While achievement did have something to say in the matter, it was more a question of structural inequality that guided the allocation of roles and rewards in society. Given this fundamental problem, there would always be a body of people who were excluded from positions of power and prestige, irrespective of whether or not they deserved to be excluded. The unequal distribution of resources characteristic of such a society would itself affect education in a variety of ways, creating a further series of obstacles to the acquisition of merit.

In a highly stratified society, the discourse of achievement and merit does seem to help in motivating people to compete and work harder for rewards that are fewer than the number of claimant hands. However, it appears also to have legitimising effects for the injustice of such societies. It seems to say that this situation is fair and those who did not get rewards did not deserve them. Earl Hopper (1973) referred to the need for a "cooling-off" system to help those who were not selected to reconcile themselves with their statuses. If they were to believe the procedure to be unjust or unfair, they would be likely to rebel and increase the instability of the system.

Much of the sociology of education over the last 30 years has been about the many ways in which education gets subverted, distorted or denied to certain kinds of people. It has documented the many ways in which educational opportunity gets denied, thus revealing the challenges to the creation of a meritocracy.

## Social Structure and Selection

The sociology of education has examined social obstacles to human growth in several ways. One basic theme has been that of structural relations which restrict the processes of selection. This has often expressed itself in studies of access to schooling in the paradigm of social stratification and social mobility. The classic studies in this tradition are exemplified by books like J. E. Floud, A. H. Halsey and F. M. Martin's (1956) *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* and A. H. Halsey, A. F. Heath and J. M. Ridge's (1980) *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Destination in Modern Britain*. One has seen here the development of increasingly sophisticated methodologies towards analysing the determination of life chances of a cohort by the social concomitants of its parents.

An illustration of this tradition may be seen through one of the last of Halsey's papers. In it Muriel Egerton and A. H. Halsey (1993) reported the results of a study of three 10-year cohorts of men and women in England, Scotland and Wales, born in between 1936 and 1945, 1946 and 1955, and 1956 and 1965, respectively. They examined the relations between social class

(following a typology built by John Goldthorpe), gender and higher education. Over these three cohorts they found a remarkable resistance to change in the higher education of different classes. The kind of institution being chosen and the age at which a degree was obtained displayed an overall persistence of relative class positions. Gender, however, was showing a gradual declining trend in its effect.

Clearly there were structural processes which overwhelmed the ability of education to offer social mobility. Studies like these have examined the effects of class, ethnicity, race, gender, etc, on the mobility which a given educational system offers. This has also been made the basis of comparisons between different societies. A classic theoretical modelling of this was done by Earl Hopper (1968). He proposed a typology of educational systems on the basis of the character of social mobility, differentiating systems on the basis of four axes: (1) Whether selection was through a centralised, homogeneous system or a decentralised system offering spaces for local elites and factions; (2) Early or late differentiation and specialisation of routes; (3) Particularist ideologies of curriculum versus universalist ideologies; (4) Individualist grounds of selection versus collectivist grounds. The picture that emerged of education and opportunity in different countries was one of the complex and many-dimensional obstacles to meritocracy. Richard Breen and Jan O Jonsson (2005) have recently reviewed studies conducted since 1990 of the relation between education and inequality of opportunity in European countries and the US.

In India, debates have centred around the policies of the government and funding agencies, rather than on building comprehensive pictures of the involved processes. There is a very large body of studies of the factors involved in school enrolments of the SC/ST and the girl-child. Vimla Ramachandran and Aartee Saihjee (2002) review several such studies to sketch out an overall pattern of deep inequalities and a gradual process of improvement. Gita Nambissan (2001) has mapped clear disparities around caste, class and gender in eight Rajasthan villages.<sup>1</sup> The latest annual report of the department of education, ministry of human resource development (MHRD), says that the dropout rate by class X in 2002 was about 63 per cent.<sup>2</sup> In sharp contrast, the percentage of a cohort which is unable to complete school in the US is between 12 per cent and 15 per cent.<sup>3</sup> Strangely, nobody seems to want to talk about how many Indians actually pass out of class XII and are even eligible to go to college. I have not been able to find any reliable figures for this. My own estimate is that somewhere around 80 per cent of the relevant cohort are denied the opportunity to even sit for competitive exams after class XII. This tells us much about the relative inequality in our respective countries and about the access to opportunities in them. It also tells us much about the commitment over the last 50 years of the most powerful sections of our country towards increasing opportunities.

### Microprocesses of Selection

Another basic thrust in the sociology of education has been to study the microprocesses which predispose educational selection. It is true that much of the denial of opportunity occurs through a simple absence of quality schooling or through differences in the kinds of schools to which children can go. At the same time, studies of microprocesses tell us much about what happens that leads to filtering some in and some out even when children do go to the same kind of school. A benchmark study

in what came to be called “labelling theory” was done by David Hargreaves, Stephen Hester and Frank Mellor (1975). They studied two secondary schools in UK and concluded that teachers went through a process of categorisation of students that soon crystallised into a rigid framework. There was an initial speculative phase in which teachers tried to build their own understanding of what the children were like. This was done primarily on features like children’s appearance, their submissiveness to discipline, their likeability and ability to get along with other children and their deviance from expected behaviours. These were the criteria which were significantly prejudiced in favour of certain cultures and against others. The speculative phase of labelling moved into an elaboration phase where interactions with the children (of whatever kind that might happen to occur) were used to confirm or modify the initial labels. These then stabilised and usually stayed in place for the rest of the time a child might spend in that teacher’s class. Such labelling tended to reinforce and corral the development of children into the patterns defined by their teachers.

Padma Sarangapani (2003) delineates a parallel process in her ethnographic study of a school near Delhi. There is an underlying norm of the “educated man” and students are sifted through categories of “model students” and “failures”. The model student is characterised by being submissive, displaying “good” behaviour before teachers and parents, and a certain kind of personal hygiene.

Even a rebellion against teachers and the school usually produced no different results. Paul Willis’ (1977) famous *Learning to Labour*, was a nuanced ethnography of working class children in school. Willis hung around with the rebels, who mocked their teachers and cursed students who submitted and accepted the institution’s authority. These rebellions did give some working class children a greater sense of dignity in opposition to the domineering visage of the school and all it stood for. Yet, these very rebellions ensured that they got even more distanced from the possibilities of the school. It made sure that they stayed locked in working class jobs and were unable to break out of them.

### Culture and Curriculum

A basic issue that emerges in the question of merit is that of advantages being held by certain cultures over the rest. Thomas Sowell (1981), for instance, writes about the advantages possessed by the communities with strong literate traditions in adapting to schools, and the careers they gave access to in America. Jews, Sowell said, with a long history of reverent, Talmudic scholarship, tended to do much better than the Irish Americans with their cheery, lively oral tradition. This has an immediate resonance with trying to understand who does well in Indian schools.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work on education, class and culture is a lot of help in understanding the hidden advantages and disadvantages of different communities. Bourdieu (2003) argues that schools are dominated by arbitrary cultures and submission to them leads to our losing sight of the fact of domination. Myths, as Roland Barthes, tended to suggest, were so powerful simply because they appeared to be “only natural”. To these institutions soaked with the power of arbitrary cultures, came children and young adults from diverse social origins – of community, class, gender and so on. Their social origins were responsible for building what Bourdieu called habituses, durable dispositions that generated certain patterns of responses to situations. The habitus was what connected everyday actions with deep, underlying

codes of behaviour. It was the basis of generating performances from codes, much as a maestro creates variations on the flute around a central theme. The audience which shares the code is able to appreciate the performance and feel deeply moved by it, and does not hear it as just a random collection of whistles, that is as noise. The privileging of certain codes in schools and universities gave advantages to those who possessed corresponding habituses.

Groups which had historical advantages accumulated greater habituses and codes suited to certain situations. This cultural capital led to their having an upper hand, even while claiming that everyone was competing in a level field. The cultural capital of the powerful, by virtue of their pre-eminent positions in modern institutions, gave them advantages of several kinds. In his books *The Inheriters: French Students and Their Relation to Culture* [Bourdieu 1979] and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* [Bourdieu 2003], he gives a series of illustrations of how it was through culture now that inequality built boundaries around itself. The basic inequality of the situation led to advantages continuing to be held by birth, rather than by deed.

Domination claimed to be based on the cultural traits most suited for triumphing over a given problem. However, it could be of an arbitrary nature, which provided its advantages simply by virtue of being in previous domination of a field. Bourdieu argued that the impact of this on relatively new entrants into the field could be seen as a symbolic violence. In India, habituses and the symbolic violence of the classroom express themselves in perverse ways. Rahul Varman writes (2006):

...in my first engineering class I was told that a good engineer is the one who can produce the best out of the least resources and similarly, management is supposed to find one's way in an uncertain situation – or allocate scarce resources in the most optimal way possible. If that is so, whatever I have seen of our deprived masses (of which overwhelming majority belongs to the backward, dalit castes or adivasis), they have the astonishing capacity to make something productive from almost next to nothing! For the last few years I have been studying small industry clusters, like Moradabad brass, Varanasi silk and Kanpur leather. Put together (all the clusters in the country), they are exporting more than the IT sector and their cumulative employment will be several times of the whole of IT industry. In all these clusters they operate with minuscule resources – small investment, no electricity, forget about air conditioning, non-existent roads, lack of water, and little formal education. These clusters are primarily constituted of these so-called backward/dalit castes and are truly a tribute to the genius that our society is. But in spite of centuries of excellence these communities have hardly produced any formal “engineers”, “doctors” and “managers”, and conversely these elite institutions have not developed any linkages with such industries and their people.

The content of knowledge on the basis of which examinations were devised often have only an oblique relation to the higher level for which filtering is being done. It is commonplace for human resource (HR) managers to remark at the time of recruitment of engineers that even an ordinary class XII pass could do those jobs with six months of training. What they sought was an attitude – an attitude that showed that this person would fit in well with the existing culture of the organisation.

Even when the cultural capital was directly linked to the task at hand, its distribution remained an expression of historical advantage, not just contemporary achievement. Young people from a working class environment, for instance, could glue themselves to their textbooks, but were unable, at least initially, to feel the kind of inspiration or calling to scholarship which

their upper class peers could experience. It remained part of a code of instrumentality, never a code of creativity or self-expression. I see this everyday in my classes of sociology, where students who come from families where literary writings are prized, be they Premchand or Gabriel Garcia Marquez, feel deeply moved by what we talk about. Other students, however, stirred they may be (and how can sociology not stir you?), find themselves struggling to get a grip on what is happening in the class. To be sure, they do eventually find their feet, but such students could also easily have been declared to have been lacking merit and closed out of future opportunities to learn.

Merit, then, cannot be taken on face value, as a measure of the worth of a person. It is better seen as a cultural artefact, in the tradition of talking about culture which Louis Althusser and Clifford Geertz elaborated (amongst many other illustrious pioneers). That is, as a part of a set of interrelated, mutually reinforcing, but complex and heterogeneous meanings, which has only a partial connection to reality. With Gramsci, Foucault and Barthes we see the discourse of merit to be influenced by a series of interests, distorted by power and shaped by discrete groups of voices. Like all good and powerful myths it has a part correspondence with truth. But myths also have their appeal because they build generalisations which suit certain situations and meet certain needs. The needs of power and the needs of counter-resistance to it being prominent among them.

## Credentialism

A powerful insight into the notion of merit has come through studies of what has come to be called credentialism. The works of people like Ronald Dore, Randall Collins and, in recent years, Steven Brint have examined the rise and flourishing of paper degrees in the context of modernity, without taking at face value the popular interpretations of the merit of the degree-holder. An important contribution of this perspective has been to help us understand the pre-eminent position credentials have acquired.

Ronald Dore's (1976, 1997)<sup>4</sup> wrote about the new organisational forms that were emerging with modernisation and industrialisation. They sought to rationalise their recruitment through an emphasis on degrees and academic performances. In the first world economies there were much fewer jobs at higher levels than applicants so a process of credential inflation took place. A gradual rise would tend to take place in the minimum qualifications needed for a given position. As Dore put it, if earlier a junior secondary school certificate was enough to get a bus-conductor's job, with a greater number of applicants, the bus company was likely to start making a senior school certificate its cut-off expectation. This saved interviewing time and was also a convenient flag to wave at a powerful man trying to put pressure on you to hire his nephew. Over the last century, Dore argued, this process had led to an inflation of credentials which had only little to do with the needs of the job and was leading to a wastage of educational resources. Further, it tended to distort the meaning of education into just a means of getting jobs, over and above education as a way of self-improvement or as a way of learning how better to do a job. In the third world countries, Dore argued, the distorting effects of this process got magnified, given the huge differences in salaries between the older and newer industries.

A much richer set of theoretical tools was brought to bear upon credentialism by Randall Collins (1971, 1979). He was sceptical about the claims of technical advantages being provided by selecting those with merit and the consequent stratification of

society on the basis of those advantages. Collins brought together statistics to show that over the last century there had been a distinct jump in the minimum years of study done by workers in different kinds of jobs. However, he pointed out, the rise in paper degrees did not correlate well with the rise in productivity. Greater education need not make a better and more efficient worker. There was a degree of variability here which needed an explanation.

To explain the slack in the correlation Collins turned to the processes of power in the modern organisations. He argued that central to modern organisations was the formation of groups which sought to monopolise power and engaged in conflict amongst each other. These were quintessential status groups in the Weberian sense. Credentials served as markers for entry into these status groups and contributed crucially to their meaning and significance. Along with processes of credential inflation, it was the dynamics of status group politics that increased the visibility of credentials far in excess of the actual contribution they might be making to technical efficiency.

In an increasingly bureaucratised world, a new kind of sinecure politics had emerged. A prominent expression of it had been in the growth of professions as status groups which controlled their boundaries and sought to monopolise advantages. In our rationalising contemporary times, it was the paper credential that served as the pass for entry to these groups. Collins pointed to the successful efforts by medical profession in the US to practice this politics and contrasted it with the relative lack of success found by engineers, who remained fragmented with a variety of entry points and a loose stratification system within the domain of industry.

## Merit as Ideology

To sum up then, achievement and merit emerge as key concepts in a culture and political economy which attacks privileges of birth and community. They emphasise human freedom and equality. At the same time they, paradoxically, also are a gloss over less easily recognisable divisions which obstruct those same principles which merit claims to defend.

There are the following basic problems in accepting the commonsensical interpretation of merit – (1) it is based on individual acts, instead of seeing individuals as part of social structures, drawing from the cultural and social resources available to them; (2) it mistakenly legitimises a sharp inequality of rewards; (3) it mistakenly legitimises an economic system based on injustice; (4) it carries forth several advantages of birth, rather than of deed; (5) it claims technical efficiencies which may or may not be real; (6) there is a mistaken legitimisation of status group politics.

Merit now appears as a part of the cultural system that is closely linked with the stratification of opportunities and resources in a liberal democracy. It is intimately connected with the rationalisation of our life world in the form of bureaucratic organisations. As commonly used in the contemporary debates, it provides an ideology of freedom and opportunity and also legitimises the processes that deny these very ideals. This leads it to promote and sustain a certain kind of social system and makes it an ideology suitable to the interests of certain groups in society.

## Sociology of the Meritorious

There has emerged in India a section whose rewards and aspirations are linked with such a cultural interpretation of merit. They are those who have been integrated into the organisational

forms of modernity or those who keenly seek that integration. There are many millions in India today who would swear by merit. It inspires lakhs 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, as discussed earlier, 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. Wherever endogamous groups provided the basic framework of society, the applicability of merit ended with the boundary of lines of marriage and descent. 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 its cutting across the boundaries of endogamous groups and refusal, at least in principle, to recognise their eternal nature. Among the British, too, this was not an ancient practice. 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 – just as in India all adult males of a certain age could be equals within a jati or a gotra – and selection of a leader could take 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, bribery and nepotism. Rich and influential members of the ruling aristocracy would appoint their relatives and followers to important positions in the state. In certain situations, one could also buy one's place up in the world. 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. This system crumbled substantially when the rise took place in the 18th and 19th centuries of commercial and manufacturing classes and they, too, demanded a share of the pie. These were the classes that 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 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 support of merit.

The trading, manufacturing and professional groups demanded that positions in the state be opened up to those with qualities achieved through hard work, study and special ability. These were also the occupational groups whose young were going in

increasing numbers to study in universities and the definition of merit began to be done in the symbols of academia. Desirable qualities were typically defined in terms of the curriculum and examinations acquired there.

The greatest impact of this was felt in the bureaucratized organisations which were emerging with modernity. The basis of legitimate power in them began to change. Groups emerged which increasingly pushed “merit” 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 this period 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, too, which quickly emerged.

The first large-scale open examination in the British empire, 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 elites managed to stave off competitive exams for their home civil service for many more years. Yet, the cultural dimensions of 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. British bureaucrats were willing to push for equality and merit so long as it served the interests of the status group which they now formed. 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 basis for recruitment helps us understand its appeal and its role in the culture of what we Indians call the service class. It was central to the rise of the service 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 of privilege 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

in which certain knowledges get privileged over others only because of the distribution of power in the society. That the Indian middle classes find this lack of legitimacy difficult to acknowledge is hardly surprising. It goes against the grain of the culture which sustains and motivates them. With the growing importance of employment in large bureaucracies – whether of the state or of corporations – careers which do not rely on paper credentials look increasingly insignificant. It is the education system which seems to promise these particular classes (and not others) the best possibility of upward mobility. This promise gains special significance because the worth of the old ways and symbols is steadily falling under, among other things, the onslaught of the mass media and its cultures of consumerism.

Questioning merit means to question this entire system of escape into a life of new mobile phones, air-conditioned houses, private hospitals and the joys promised by television commercials. To question merit is to question individualism, to doubt the justice of the job market, to puncture the legitimacy of consumerism. These are all central to middle class culture today. Yet, equality and freedom, too, continue to be attractive principles. We continue to empathise with the underprivileged, we continue to feel terrible about the denial of opportunity to millions. Perhaps, those principles 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 goodness as well as for equality of opportunity. Where it does not serve as a label that legitimises systemic inequality and injustice.

It will be a difficult challenge, because the lies of our meritocracy are interlinked with many processes that coopt us. To question the legitimacy of credentials is to question all the rewards that they lead to – consumerism as the reward for high credentials and even the simple pleasure of believing one is better than one’s neighbour begins to appear watery and shaky. An entire culture based on the covert acceptance of mythologies of success and superiority begins to unravel. It is a huge task, but it has already begun in the work of many critiques of late industrial society.

## Rethinking Merit

The “meritocracy” even as it exists today provides a great advance over the rigid encirclements of feudalism and the caste system. But if one wishes to complete the circle drawn by the logic of equality and freedom for human growth, then our present system falls far short of what is desired. One must rethink the contours of a notion of merit such that it expresses a more accurate vision of human possibilities, one that may encourage and support a society where there is a striving for excellence going hand in hand with the universalisation of excellence – through equality of opportunity, resources and dignity. In any case, there cannot be a widespread striving for excellence without equality. Then, what does this mean for my own practice as a teacher and a scholar? As an employer, as a worker?

The rethinking of cultures and of social structures must be part of an actual engagement in social, political and economic struggle. The final contours may be visible to us only through that wider struggle. There would be the need to develop techniques and strategies suitable for specific situations and specific contexts. However, to begin with, what it may mean to a teacher is that all the students in his class have equally high potential. Their performance until now may have been obstructed and shaped

by experiences of the past. But, given an encouraging and active teaching effort, with careful feedback and individualised attention, there is no knowing how high anyone may soar. This does put a greater load on the teacher. But it also makes life much more meaningful and productive. And it is closer to reality than the notion that "I teach for the best, hell with the rest". For the best may actually be many more than just three-four out of a class of 40.

Doing the above is obviously quite difficult in today's schools, colleges and universities. Which is why the present system of education is itself one of the biggest obstacles to the cultivation of merit. The support of merit must, therefore, go hand in hand with rethinking the nature of education and its practice. It means converting the role of the teacher from a mechanical transmitter of given knowledges, into one who encourages students to think and to feel. It means transforming the act of learning from the frightened responses of cowed students into a joyous act of affirmation. The support of merit also means the rethinking of the evaluation system into one that gives continuous feedback, and inspires minds instead of reifying them.

The rethinking of merit must ask what the attributes are that are desired to build the good society. These would be the attributes that a worthwhile learning environment cultivates rather than the short-term opportunism which we presently encourage in the name of competition. For processes of selection, it would accept that there may be many more suitable applicants than can be reasonably accommodated at a given point of time. It would accept the injustice of this process of selection. That acceptance would permit and encourage pressure to reform the system, instead of covering up and legitimising unfairness.

Naturally, all this goes against the grain of much of contemporary industry and the prestige systems it rests upon. Credentialism legitimises and nourishes the moral frameworks of today's workforce. The valorisation of distinctions between many ranks is central to the way labour is controlled and managed. The increasingly large pay check drawn as one goes higher in the organisation's hierarchy is justified by one's putative merit and the distance that is claimed to exist between those above and those below. The sociological understanding of merit threatens to deflate the moral framework of the modern organisation. The acceptance of injustice in the way the organisation is built is the path to change. Those in positions of power, even if that is a small amount of power at the lower ends of a bureaucracy, feel threatened by it.

There is little new to this. The notion of merit itself had deflated and devastated the moral frameworks of feudalism. Claims of blood and royalty were exposed as hollow and meaningless. This was an important aspect of the eventual overthrow of feudalism by capitalist industry.

The rethinking of merit and its cultivation means, therefore, that one must make a shift away from the needs of an industry based on unfair inequalities and an amoral technical rationality in labour. The answer lies not in the escape of a mind-numbing relaxation in our time off from work. It may lie in a vast process that is gradually opposing the logic of contemporary societies. History may probably not have an inevitability in it. But it is indeed possible that we may actually create a society where excellence, freedom and equality get much greater encouragement than they get right now. The many voices of dissent that speak up and the many innovative models that are being tried give us hope. **EPW**

Email: amman@iitk.ac.in

## Notes

[Kalyani Dike Madan made this essay possible. It started off as a series of popular articles written for *Srote: Science and Technology Features*, later being built into a larger paper through presentations at the Vidya Bhawan Rural Institute, Udaipur, the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, JNU and the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur. I am grateful for the many comments and criticisms received.]

- 1 R Govinda (2002) brings together a valuable overview of the state of India's education.
- 2 Department of Education, Annual Report, p 262. <http://education.nic.in/Annualreport2004-05/Annexures.pdf> d/1 March 2, 2007.
- 3 'Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003: Population Characteristics', <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf> d/1 March 15, 2007.
- 4 Dore's original book is now difficult to obtain. However, the journal *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* devoted an entire issue (Vol 4, No 1) to reconsidering the book in 1997, including articles by Dore himself. I am grateful to Leena Abraham for drawing my attention to it.

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