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Affirmative Action for Female Students in IITs - A Step towards More Inclusive India

Mahatma Gandhi in his various speeches and deeds had emphasized the amelioration of the two of the worst social evils in Indian society. First and one of the most obvious was untouchability. The acknowledgement of the fact that untouchability is one of the worst social evils, in and of itself, has been a great achievement of the Indian society as a whole. People in the past could not realize the unjust nature of untouchability to begin with. But the institutionalized nature of untouchability has been questioned by prominent leaders and efforts to counter it have been made accordingly.

The other social evil which is more subtly ingrained yet which goes completely unacknowledged is that of gender discrimination. Patriarchy is a phenomenon which is present in most of the civilized world to varying degree. The parochial rationale of more muscular sex being an unquestionably superior gender is deeply ingrained in all of us. The subtle yet paramount injustice that this rationale inflicts on other gender is a phenomenon which makes humans a unique species which boasts on being an intelligent species on the one hand but on the other hand allows such injustices to perpetuate.

The gender discrimination being an unacknowledged social evil can be learned from the fact that untouchability is being addressed through various means specifically targeted towards countering it. Affirmative action in the form of reservation in education and jobs is only one of them. Women on



the other hand have been left at the mercy of the very society which has given rise to that social evil in the first place. A woman has to keep proving their mettle in front of people who have been trained to ignore her, avoid her, take her for granted and above all have an extremely condescending attitude towards her. And so far the state has been indifferent at large towards addressing this social evil.

The latest decision of the government to reserve more seats for girls in Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), however, looks like a silver lining around the dark cloud of patriarchy for women. The HRD Ministry has decided to raise number of female students from current 8 to 9 percent to 20 percent by 2020 is a laudable move in the direction of affirmative action. Even at the country wide level if we take into account all government and private education institutions for engineering and technology, then percentage enrollment of female students stands at just 12 percent.ⁱ The affirmative action by the state is one of the most prominent weapons against the social practices which discriminate against certain sections of the society. The state which is the only institution which can use legitimate power to counter such social evils should conscientiously strive to neutralize such practices. And that is precisely what state seems to be doing in this situation.

As per a survey named 'Women in Engineering: A Comparative Study of Barriers Across the Nations', the most likely explanation for the high male-female ratios in India's top engineering colleges is the use of high discrete cut-off on tests scores in the selection criteria (apart from weak self-selection effects).ⁱⁱ The inherent discrepancy in such test results is a direct outcome of a social environment which doesn't particularly encourage female students to venture into engineering stream. Even to this date, certain branches of engineering like Mechanical, Chemical, Civil and Construction, to name a few, are considered as anathema for females. Against this backdrop, if the test itself and selection through high cut off test scores is not changed in any way, then the top-tiered engineering



programs will remain stagnant with abysmally high Male to Female Ratios (MFRs). Given that there is little evidence that the standardized admission tests have strong correlation to engineering success, a high cutoff on these test scores is unwarranted. It requires a more holistic selection process to accommodate capable female candidates, and till that is done, a state backed affirmative action is indispensable to ensure respectable representation of female students. And keeping with this spirit, the Ministry of Human resource Development is focusing on expanding the parameters used as selection criteria to identify India's most capable female talent and not just depend on scores of a written test, which will prove as a catalyst to encourage future female students to pursue engineering.

Every other report by the Ministry of Human Resource on female participation in technical field shows the hostile environment for the growth of women in professional life rather than showing the incapability of women. The glass ceiling effect is a universal phenomenon. The only solution to the problem of discrimination against women and sometimes outright misogyny at work place is to have more and more women at such places. It cannot be expected of men who have been conditioned to think on patriarchal lines to look at the potentials that women possess neutrally and promote it conscientiously. The state as a social institution is also not exempt from male domination. All the more reason why the current decision is praiseworthy.

The stereotypical image of women working unpaid in houses and as sole care giver of children has to be molded if not destroyed totally. In addition to promoting awareness among men there is need to instill a positive identity in women. That identity alone has the capacity to bring self confidence in women in public life. The education is a great vehicle to instill that positive identity. Thus such encouragement by the state will begin to open the door for more capable female candidates to receive the consideration they deserve. The present decision to increase number of female students to 20 percent by 2020 is not only a question of fairness,



but also one of efficiency. Without making room for the wide range of talent available to India's engineering sector, India remains limited in its capacity for innovation. Hence, having more capable females in top-notch institutions can improve the health of India's engineering sector and the landscape of future innovation.

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- i. *All India Survey on Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Higher Education, Government of India, 2013.*
http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics/AISH2011-12P_1.pdf
 - ii. *'Women in Engineering: A Comparative Study of Barriers Across the Nations'.*
<http://www.aspiringminds.com/research-articles/women-in-engineering-a-comparative-study-of-barriers-across-nations>.



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Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org



@vifindia

