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India's Affirmative Action War

By ARYN BAKER/NEW DELHI

Sprawled in the middle of a university courtyard under a large tent, some 50 students at the hyper-competitive All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) are doing what any doctor would tell them not to — starving themselves. Now on the sixth day of an indefinite hunger strike, their hand-written white T-shirts make clear their position on the government's controversial new policy to increase quotas for lower-caste students at the country's elite educational institutions: DON'T MIX POLITICS WITH MERIT; QUOTAS: THIS CURE IS WORSE THAN THE DISEASE; MERIT IS MY CASTE, WHAT'S YOURS?

"Modern India should be built on merit, not caste," says Dr. Sudip Sen, 34, a Ph.D. student in biochemistry at AIIMS. "What's next — are we going to let a slow runner represent India in the Olympics? No, we are going to send our best runner out for the 100 meters, no matter his caste. It should be the same for all fields."

Countless other Indian medical workers who have gone on strike this week feel much the same as Sen, which is why India's sudden battle over affirmative action makes the ongoing divide in the U.S. over racial preferences seem tame by comparison. Public hospitals across the country have shut their doors to all but emergency services; private hospitals in some Delhi suburbs are following suit; trade unions have called for a morning of civil disobedience; and students at India's elite business schools are meeting to plan their own protests. In spite of the disruption, the government has sworn that it will not back down, regardless of who resigns or how many protest. Increased quotas, it claims, are the only way to foster social equality at the institutions that are driving the Indian economy forward.

That fast-growing economy often makes it easy to forget India's rigidly stratified past. But any country hurtling along the path to modernization is at risk of being occasionally slowed down by the weight of its own history, and in this case, India has been yanked to a crawl by 3,000 years of a strictly codified social pecking order.

Unlike race or class, caste is not something that can be read in the color of one's skin or in the cut of one's clothes. Caste is written in a far more nuanced language of family name, livelihood, origin and identity politics; yet it is an issue that has managed to polarize the nation. Urban Indians, increasingly categorized by wealth, say that caste has no bearing on the kind of jobs they can get, yet classified matrimonial ads often list caste as a principal criterion in the search for a suitable spouse. In the countryside, caste defines not just social status and employment opportunities, but also access to education.

The government proposal at the heart of the conflict aims to reserve an additional 27% of university seats

for the unfortunately termed "Other Backward Classes (OBC)" — those who, while not on the lowest rung of the social ladder, are not far from it. Once the new quotas go into effect at the start of the 2007 school year, nearly 50% of seats at elite universities such as AIIMS or the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology will be set aside for members of the lower castes.

But even some people who theoretically would benefit from such quotas oppose them on principle. "I came here under my own merit," says Deepika Gupta, 18, a first-year student at AIIMS and member of a lower caste herself. "I don't want anyone thinking I'm here because of a quota. If everyone comes here on their own steam then they will get equal respect for what they have achieved."

Detractors stress that it is not just because of merit that they oppose the quota system; they believe it is not addressing the real problems in India. If the lower castes and classes had equal opportunities earlier in life, they argue, quotas wouldn't be necessary for higher education. "Instead of reserving 10 seats at AIIMS, educate 10,000 children. Then you will see a difference in Indian society," says Sen.

Like the battles over affirmative action in the United States, the rhetoric in India has been at times fierce. Sharad Yadav, a former Union minister, wrote an op-ed for the *Hindustan Times* in which he accused opponents of the proposal of trying to undermine India's long-sought social equality, calling them "elites," and comparing them to colonial-era administrators who denied the untouchable castes an education for fear of losing a monopoly over jobs.

"It is ridiculous to think that those protesting the reservation system are elitists intent on maintaining their superiority and that those who support them are representing the people," says Andre Beteille, a Delhi University professor and scholar of social inequity in India. "This situation is not about caste, it's about politics." Cynics echo that view, pointing out that the lower castes who would benefit from the reforms are one of the most active voting blocs in state elections.

Beteille is one of two members of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's so-called Knowledge commission who publicly resigned their posts this week over the quota issue. "It is often said that caste is a reality in India," wrote Pratap Bhanu Mehta, in an incendiary open letter of resignation printed in the *Indian Express*. "I couldn't agree more. But your government is in the process of making caste the only reality in India."

In an attempt to calm the situation, the government is now pushing an idea to increase overall university seats next year to make up for those set aside for quotas. But even that seems to have backfired. "They may increase the number of seats," says Ankur Goyal, in his final year of medical school, "but what about professors, facilities, infrastructure? The result is that they are lowering the quality of our education. That's not the way India is going to keep its competitive edge."

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