



A primer



**totus consulting services (p) limited**

# for a cause...

The '**CENTRE FOR ACTION IN TRAINING, EDUCATION AND RESEARCH**' hereafter called with acronym 'CATER' was established by a group of well-qualified, like-minded and committed Social Scientists and Educationists. It is moving fast to serve the rural masses for their socio-economic, cultural and environmental upliftment. It was started on the 11th February 1991

## **VISION STATEMENT OF CATER:**

CATER envisions a Society based on

- Justice- social and economic
- Equality of opportunities
- Freedom in making choices

It also envisions development which will be sustainable and which will provide enough space for the vulnerable of the society to grow.

## **MISSION:**

- To build vibrant small village communities in Tamilnadu.
- To initiate sustainable and equitable development processes.
- To create and support mechanisms to secure economic and social upliftment of the rural poor.
- To enable rural women to assert their identities and rights.
- To enable the physically and mentally challenged persons to meet their challenges successfully.
- To rehabilitate and integrate disabled people into the main stream of community life.

CATER has expanded its activities to 100 villages in 5 Panchayat Unions belonging to Tiruchirapalli, Pudukotal and Sivaganga Districts of Tamilnadu. It covers a wide range of 25000 target-people including women, small and marginal farmers, landless agricultural labourers, the aged persons and Persons with Disability. It has developed 215 Self-Help Groups, 31 Cluster Groups and 3 Federations covering 3811 permanent members in three districts of the area of operation.

## **CATER ACTIVITIES:**

CATER'S Programmes are of two types:

- 1. Sustainable Community Development Programmes**
- 2. Community-Based Rehabilitation Programmes.**

### **The Sustainable Community Development Programmes include the following activities:**

- Forming Sanghas at the village level for women and men of the marginalized communities from a defined geographical area.
- Integrating self-help groups and cluster groups into a Federation.
- Empowering women by providing leadership and entrepreneurial skills in order to resist the forces of exploitation.

- Empowering women to own and manage the resources individually and collectively.
- Strengthening the economically poor and socially oppressed people through credit unions.
- Initiating sustainable agricultural programmes through organic agricultural strategies and integrated farming systems.
- Empowering women to become the agents of economic, social and cultural changes.
- Educating the members on the need to take care of senior citizens by integrating them into the main stream of family and community life.
- Establishing housing facilities for the most neglected people of the target groups.

### **The Community Based Rehabilitation Programmes include the following activities.**

- Identifying the physically and mentally challenged children and providing the necessary support for their functional independence.
- Providing vocational training and income generating programmes for them.
- Forming self-help groups for the parents and the guardians of these children with a view to empowering the parents and the guardians.

## **FUTURE PROGRAMMES:**

- Empowering the Federation as a powerful apex-body which will lobby for the sustainable development of the entire woman folk in the target-areas.
- Integrating Women's Federations at the local and district levels.
- Linking the Micro Credit Unions with the Micro Enterprises with special emphasis on Marketing Activities.
- Accessing the government-sponsored programmes.
- Establishing "Model Farms" in all the three districts so as to enable the farmers and the staff to get practical knowledge on agro based activities.
- Training the parents of the disabled children in community based rehabilitation programmes and enabling them to establish organizations for the welfare of these children in future.
- Accessing the assistance of the government and other agencies for sustaining the CBR Programmes.

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*Dear Friends*

*I am pleased to present to you the next edition of Under the Bonnet.*

*This edition addresses an issue of importance not only to the field of Human Resources but also the entire nation - Equal Opportunity.*

*Why equal opportunity, and what does it have to do with HR, you might wonder.*

*Our interest in the subject grew over a year ago, when the nation was in the midst of a debate about reservations in the private sector. After analyzing the points and counter-points, we decided that it was important for an Indian HR consulting company to devote time and energy to understand the subject well enough to be able to spread awareness and offer insights.*

*In what ways does the subject of equal opportunity impact Human Resources management?*

*Any discussion about equal opportunity would normally be theoretical unless there are "opportunities" to begin with. For many decades, "opportunity" meant employment with the Government or the Public Sector and these were on a downward slide. After years, India today finds itself in the midst of a great opportunity - an opportunity to create employment for millions in reasonably paying front-line jobs in sectors including infrastructure, services and manufacturing. Interestingly, most of these opportunities are in the private sector (albeit unorganised) and not in the government sector where some form of reservations exist. This demand for labour could well serve as a vehicle to create the growth we have always been talking about.*

*If India can find a way to leverage these opportunities to bring at least a significant population of underprivileged people into the mainstream, we would have truly achieved the goal of equal opportunity. To move in this direction, we believe that the first step is acceptance and awareness. Creating this awareness is the singular objective behind this edition of Under the Bonnet. We do not profess to have figured out a solution to an issue that the nation has grappled with for over half a century. Therefore you will find our approach more educative and less prescriptive.*

*We do hope however that the effort is inspiring!*

*Do let us know, anyway.*

*Ganesh Chella*



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## It's not picture perfect

*Set in 1890, Lagaan is the story of how the residents of Champaner, a village in Avadh (modern Uttar Pradesh), master the game of cricket in three months and defeat the British cantonment team. The wager is that the British would not impose tax (lagaan) for the next three years if Champaner wins the match.*

*What is central to our discussion is the character of Kachra, a dalit who is spotted by Bhuvan the Captain, standing on the margins - literally - as the ball rolls before him. Bhuvan asks Kachra to throw the ball back. A petrified Kachra, with a small broom in his left hand, his right hand handicapped, is sweating. Hero Bhuvan goads him to throw the ball and Kachra does it with his disabled hand. The ball spins wildly. Bhuvan is impressed and wants to rope Kachra in as the team's eleventh member. Predictably, the entire village from mukhiya (chief) to vaid (doctor) opposes the move. Bhuvan launches into a speech, saying even Rama had eaten the fore-bitten fruit of Sabari. Everyone is won over, audience included.*

*A perfect case of someone fighting for equal opportunity, taking on caste-based discrimination and recognising true hidden talent.*

*Unfortunately, life in India is not replete with too many Bbuvans. Read on and you will discover a lot more subtle forms of discrimination:*

*Shyam is a bright young boy. His tastes and interests are not different from most other kids of his age. There is only one problem. Most of the small pleasures that most kids of his age take for granted - going to a supermarket, seeing a movie, visiting a library are not possible because most of these places are not wheel-chair friendly.*

*Kumar studied in a very reputed school. As the years went by, he realized that some of his brighter classmates were hand picked for enrichment classes since they had the potential to get into elite educational institutions. Kumar was shocked. He thought he was the one who needed enrichment inputs to do better.*

*Suresh is a student of Class I and was diagnosed as having learning disabilities. His school asked his parents to take the child off from the school. Suresh and many others like him go around struggling to find a place that accepts them with their difficulties.*

*Sukanya has completed class XII in a small town in interior Tamilnadu. She has scored good marks, thanks to months of preparation. However, her dreams of entering a professional course are distant, thanks to another hurdle she has to cross in the form of a common entrance test - something that costs money and needs preparation through coaching classes, things well beyond her means. What chance does she, a kid from the village, have against urban children, armed with weeks of special tuitions?*

*Pradip is a graduate in engineering. He is working with a*

*reputed multinational - great office, great cafeteria, and great peer group. The only problem is that he is not an employee of the organisation. He is actually employed by a staffing services company. Isn't this a case of being paid less than those who do the same work but are on the rolls of the organisation?*

*Anchal is professionally qualified and married. In most employment interviews, she is having to explain when she plans to start a family and how she will manage the period of absence.*

*The stories go on. Subtle acts of discrimination and lack of equal opportunity that we have all so easily accepted as a part of our daily lives. Acts that we acknowledge with "political correctness" but get on with life.*

*You might at first glance wonder if you are reading a journal from a Human Resources consulting company or from an activist organisation.*

*Please do read on. As an Indian human resource consulting company, it is our firm belief and conviction that the Indian dream of becoming a super power by 2020 is achievable only if all sections of our society move forward. It is our belief that lack of discrimination and by that token, equal opportunity is in fact the foundation for economic progress.*

*It is also our sad realization that even among the most educated and the most elite, even among business leaders and HR professionals, basic awareness about what "Equal Opportunity" means is very low, to say the least. Ask students and parents and they will retort angrily that reservations rob their children of scarce opportunities for education and employment. Ask employers and they will tell you that they are a meritocracy. Ask business leaders and trade bodies and they will tell you that competitive advantage is critical. Viewed from their narrow filters, there seems to be merit in their arguments. Viewed from a national perspective, we have a huge challenge on our hands.*

*Most consider the subject a "hot potato", something that is best ignored.*

*In fact, all of us at totus viewed it this way too, till we began our humble journey of discovery in this area. Our efforts culminated in a half day event titled, "Equal Opportunity India" held on December 10, 2004, to coincide with "World Human Rights Day". (The event summary is produced later in this article.)*

*This issue of UTB is dedicated to one single cause - the cause of building awareness and appreciation about the cause of equal opportunity to as many people as possible and to set in context some of the recent developments around the subject. It is our hope that out of this awareness will come action and at the least some sensitivity. We do not profess to know enough about the subject to be able to suggest remedial measures. But we do know that the problem is acute and it is in our national interest to collectively find a solution.*



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# Equal opportunity - understanding the basics

Any discussion on a subject as complex as equal opportunity calls for a thorough understanding of all the basics.

We will start this journey by getting a handle on the definitions:

## Equal Opportunity defined

Equal opportunity is defined as “absence of discrimination, based on race, caste, color, age, gender, national origin, religion, or mental or physical disability”.

Equal opportunity is a descriptive term for an approach intended to give equal access to an environment or benefits, such as education, employment, health care or social welfare to members of various social groups, some of which might otherwise suffer from discrimination. Major social groupings involved are those delineated by aspects of gender, race or religion.

Understanding the term equal opportunity will not be complete without understanding the following related terms:

### Affirmative action

*A policy or program that seeks to redress past discrimination through active measures to ensure equal opportunity, as in education and employment.*

*The term is applied almost exclusively to the use of racial, ethnic or gender preferences in allocating a variety of social benefits. The groups receiving such benefits are assumed to have been victims of systematic discrimination in the past.*

### Reverse discrimination

*Discrimination against members of a dominant or majority group, especially when resulting from policies established to correct discrimination against members of a minority or disadvantaged group.*

*The term “reverse discrimination” is sometimes considered synonymous with the terms affirmative action and positive discrimination. Some countries such as the United Kingdom, use the term “reverse discrimination” to describe the policies termed “affirmative action” in other countries, such as the US.*

### Universal access to education

*Universal access to education is the ability of all people to*

*have equal opportunity in education, regardless of their background or physical disability. The term is used both in the context of college admission and in assistive technology for the disabled.*

### Social exclusion

*Social exclusion has been defined as the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live - in this sense it is the opposite of social integration. This includes exclusion from economic, social and political spheres.*

### Economic discrimination (including Labour market discrimination)

*This refers to exclusions or restrictive inclusions or access with unequal treatment in the labour and other markets. Labour market discrimination refers to the situation of unequal treatment in the context of hiring or in wage payment of the workers possessing the same education, training and employment experience or productivity level but differing in some non-economic personal characteristics associated with race, gender or caste.*

*The attempt to establish definitions will not be complete without explaining the term “political correctness”.*

### Political correctness

*Political correctness refers to the avoidance of actions or expressions that can be perceived to exclude, marginalise, or insult individuals or groups who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against on the basis of gender, culture, race or ability. The term is sometimes used in a derogatory way to suggest that these actions or expressions are motivated more by the desire to conform to prevailing social standards rather than a genuine respect for the rights of the individual or the group.*

## The big picture

Having established a base set of definitions, it would be important to get the big picture, to understand the goal of equal opportunity clearly including where we are today, where we want to get, what is holding us back and how we can get there



# the EQUAL OPPORTUNITY journey





As is evident from the imagery, equal opportunity is a journey rather than a destination. This is for the simple reason that some form of discrimination is an inherently human practice, intended or otherwise.

It might be hard for any society to claim to have secured equal opportunity for all its citizens in all spheres at all times. Having said that, the extent of conscious efforts that nations and groups invest in moving towards that goal are very critical and of significance.

Since we are talking of a journey, it naturally follows that the current state of discrimination in which a nation finds itself and how much ground it has to cover to achieve equal opportunity are determined by its history as well as by its current values, systems and practices. Discrimination includes denial of access, restrictive access or just unequal treatment.

There is adequate research and data to demonstrate that there are economic and social consequences of not moving towards this goal.

The approaches and solutions to move towards the goal are also many. Some are mandated through legislation, some through affirmative actions and some through voluntary efforts. Quite often, it is believed that nations will need to compensate for past acts of discrimination, like allotting land to groups that have remained landless.

This is in essence what the model attempts to convey.

Given the vastness of the subject, our discussion will be restricted primarily to equal opportunity in the context of *education and employment*.

### **Why is this debate important?**

Why are the governments in developed and developing countries concerned about economic discrimination? Is discrimination only an equity issue, or does it also involve economic cost to the society? Are the costs it imposes on the society more social and political than economic?

According to Prof. Sukhdeo Thorat, Director, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, *"The conclusion of standard mainstream theoretical economic analysis indicates that economic discrimination, particularly market discrimination, does hamper economic growth, bring unequal income distribution and create a potential situation for inter-group conflict"*(based on research by Nancy Birdsall and Richard Sabot 1991). *"There is also an adverse impact on profits, wages and efficiency in the allocation of labour"*, he maintains.

Prof. Thorat maintains that *"In the case of income distribution it is quite clear that in so far as exclusion and discrimination is involved, the denial of access to resources, employment and common facilities that others have can certainly impoverish the lives that individuals from excluded groups can enjoy. From the human rights perspective, it essentially means denial of certain basic human rights. Discrimination thus becomes an issue not only of equity but also economic growth. By exacerbating current inequality between groups, and by contributing to its perpetuation from one generation to the next, discrimination and exclusion also leads to inter-group conflict"*.

The facts stare us in our face. As much as we would like to hate talking about caste based discrimination in our country, SCs & STs form 24.4% of our country's population, according to the most recent census. In addition, backward classes are reported to constitute about 52% of the population though this figure is not confirmed by the census. With three fourths of the population of our country declared backward in some manner, we have the makings of a serious challenge.

Caste related equal opportunity is only one part of the issue. We need to deal with the problems of the physically challenged, women, those living in the North-East, the economically deprived, those in the unorganised sector and so on. The debate certainly needs to be enlarged to be set in perspective.



# India's journey towards securing equal opportunity - a historical perspective

## The current debate about reservations in context

To get a historical appreciation of the efforts to create equal opportunity in India, a useful place to start would be the current debate about reservations in the private sector.

Reservation in the Private Sector is a part of the Common Minimum Programme of the UPA Government at the Centre. The Prime Minister, Finance Minister and many others have made public statements about it. The Government has overtly said that they want a debate on the issue. They have been asking for an "open mind" on the subject.

Economists, opinion leaders, business leaders, industry forums and many journalists and columnists have all had their say.

FICCI called it an "anti-industrialisation" move.

CII was even quoted as saying that, "Many US and European 500 companies that outsource their back office and research work to India provide contracts on the pre-condition that the vendors will be non-discriminatory in their recruitment...if reservations are forced, multinational clients could come under pressure from their shareholders to cancel offshoring contracts."

Several questions were raised on the subject:

1. Has 50 years of job reservation achieved its intended purpose in the Public sector?
2. Is there a genuine issue relating to the miserable state of the Dalits that we all need to be worried about?
3. Is there a better way to address this issue?
4. Will this policy affect meritocracy and India's competitiveness, image, FDI and so on?
5. Are Dalits the only group that need attention or are there other less privileged groups who also need support in employment, like the physically challenged?
6. Is the solution education or job reservation?
7. Are there global models that we can look towards?

Most industrialists reacted in predictable ways, calling the proposed step retrograde and against the spirit of merit.

A careful analysis of all the views expressed in the media indicated that most were attempting to hurriedly put a lid on the issue. There were few voices that were taking a contrary line.

The Government dispatched a letter to as many as 71 Chambers of Commerce and business bodies, stressing on the need for such affirmative action for SC/STs and also sought their views on how they thought the same could be carried out.

Following this, Mr. Ratan Tata wrote to the Government and communicated his commitment to the cause. "Tata group certainly understands the social responsibility that all Industry should carry to bring social justice to SC/ST and other minority

or underprivileged sections of our community. We would happily support your initiative."

The Tata-Government dialogue began after the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister, Ms. Meira Kumar addressed Indian Merchants' Chamber in Mumbai on September 21, 2004 initiating what the UPA has called a National Dialogue to evolve a consensus on the issue.

The efforts finally resulted in a joint declaration signed and delivered to the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Minister, Ms. Kumar by 21 industrialists on May 31, 2005.

The declaration signed by the Tata group of companies' Chairperson, Mr. Ratan Tata, said:

"The need is not just to provide jobs but incubate the emergence of a robust entrepreneurial class of youth from the SC/STs. The imperatives of a competitive economy require that industry place a premium on merit," the letter said.

"The industrial houses must create an environment where the SC/STs can become as meritorious as any other youth when they enter their economically productive years."

"We commit to expand our current activities for disadvantaged persons with regard to scholarships, company-run private schools, partnership with government schools, vocational training and other development programmes. We will do this through credible voluntary groups and implement in letter and spirit a programme of affirmative action to empower persons who are socially and economically backward," the letter said.

The signatories were "reassured to learn from the Government that it had no intention of resorting to legislative action to impose a statutory obligation of reservations on industry."

The Signatories to the letter were Anu Aga (Thermax group of companies), Rahul Bajaj (Bajaj group), Kumaramangalam Birla (Aditya Birla group), Naushad Forbes (Forbes Marshall India), Jamshyd N. Godrej (Godrej and Boyce Manufacturing Company Ltd) R.T. Khorakiwala (Switz group), H.F. Khorakiwala (Wockhardt Ltd), Suresh Krishna (TVS Group), Keshub Mahindra (Mahindra and Mahindra), A.C. Muthiah (First Leasing Company of India), B. Muthuraman (Tata Steel), N.R. Murthy (Infosys), Deepak Parekh (HDFC Bank), Azim Premji (Wipro), S. Ramadorai (Tata Consultancy Services), Gurpreet Singh (Continental Devices), Gautam Thapar (Crompton Greaves),

The others who signed the letter were Tarun Das and Sunil Kant Munjal, former Chairpersons of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), A.S. Ganguly, former Chairman of Hindustan Lever and Rafiq Zakaria, Academician.

Ms. Kumar said it was a big achievement for the Government since there was opposition when the concept of affirmative action, including reservation in private sector was mooted about a year ago. "That the corporate houses have



agreed to discuss affirmative action shows that Indian industry fully supports the Government in addressing this important social goal. This is the first step towards a bigger goal we are targeting to achieve.”

The Government has inched forward, and industry is happy that it has staved off legislation.

This is where the issue stands now.

## India's progress with securing equal opportunity

We might wonder why all debates on equal opportunity seem to revolve around caste. A look at the statistics will tell us why:

SNo.	Details	%age of population
1.	Scheduled Caste	16.2 %
2.	Scheduled Tribe	8.2 %
3.	Other Backward Castes	52 %
TOTAL		76.4 %

The above data is extracted from the Census of India: 2001, except for data on Other Backward Castes (OBCs). The data on OBCs was obtained from a write-up by Dinkar Sakrikar. The census did not collect and report data on Backward Classes.

While there are many dimensions to the debate on equal opportunity, the caste dimension has always been the most dominant one because of the sheer numbers. It is for this reason that the founding fathers of Independent India made specific provisions in the Indian Constitution to secure equality, equal opportunity and fight discrimination of all kinds. In fact, it is a matter of pride that India began its journey towards equal opportunity well ahead of many other countries.

### What the Indian Constitution envisioned

It would be worthwhile to reproduce some of the salient provisions of the Indian Constitution that are relevant to our discussion:

- The right to equality is the first of the seven fundamental rights outlined in our constitution.
- Article 15 Prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth
- Article 16 more specifically talks about *“Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment”*. It says the following:
  - There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State.
  - No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, residence or any of them, be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of, any employment or office under the State.

- Nothing in this article shall prevent Parliament from making any law prescribing, in regard to a class or classes of employment or appointment to an office under the Government of, or any local or other authority within, a State or Union territory, any requirement as to residence within that State or Union territory prior to such employment or appointment.
- Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.
- Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of posts in the services under the State in favour of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes which, in the opinion of the State, are not adequately represented in the services under the State.
- Nothing in this article shall affect the operation of any law which provides that the incumbent of an office in connection with the affairs of any religious or denominational institution or any member of the governing body thereof shall be a person professing a particular religion or belonging to a particular denomination.

Article 46 provides for the promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections. It says, “The state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation”.

## Article 338 provides for a Special Officer for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled tribes.

In addition to making constitutional provisions, the past ten five year plans have paid significant attention to this area through a variety of schemes, programs and policy initiatives, supported by budgetary allocations.

These include educational facilities, vocational or technical training, concessions like free tuition, stipends, scholarships, clothing and mid - day meals, loans and subsidies to settle down in trades, allotment of wasteland and loan for the purchase of agriculture implements, reservations in government positions and relaxations in the standards of age, qualifications or experience, organization of community centers, improvement of the living conditions of persons engaged in unclean occupation including eradication of the practice of carrying night soil as head load, subsidy for housing for sweepers and scavengers, house sites for those engaged in unclean occupation and for landless labour.

### The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment

Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment as the name suggests is meant to ensure equitable treatment to such sections



of society who have suffered social inequalities, exploitation, discrimination and injustice. (Scheduled Caste, Minorities, Backward Classes, Persons with Disabilities, Aged Persons, Street children and victims of drug abuse etc.)

The Social Defense Bureau of the Ministry caters to the requirements of:

- Neglected and marginalized people
- Abandoned destitute
- Neglected and delinquent juveniles who need care and protection for want of support or are in conflict with the society or the law
- Children of sex workers
- Street children
- Drug addicts and offenders
- The aged and host of others who need special care, protection and support.

#### *Backward Classes Welfare*

The affairs of Backward Classes were looked after by the Backward Classes Cell (BCC) in the Ministry of Home Affairs prior to 1985. With the creation of a separate Ministry of Welfare in 1985 (renamed as Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment on 25.5.1998) the matters relating to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Minorities were transferred to the new Ministry. The Backward Classes Division in the Ministry looks after the policy, planning and implementation of programmes relating to social and economic empowerment of OBCs. It also looks after matters relating to two institutions set up for the welfare of OBCs: National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation (NBCFDC) and the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC).

#### **National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation (NBCFDC)**

The National Backward Classes Finance and Development Corporation (NBCFDC) was set up by the Government of India under Ministry of Welfare (now Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment). NBCFDC's main objective is to promote economic and developmental activities for the benefit of Backward Classes and to assist the poorer sections of these classes in skill development and self employment ventures.

#### **National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC)**

Pursuant to the direction of the Supreme Court in the Mandal case judgement, the Government of India enacted the National Commission for Backward Classes Act, 1993 (Act No. 27 of 1993) for setting up a National Commission for Backward Classes at the Centre as a permanent body. The Act provides that the Commission shall consist of five Members, comprising of a Chairperson who is or has been a judge of the Supreme Court or of a High Court; a social scientist; two persons, who have special knowledge in matters relating to backward classes; and a Member-Secretary, who is or has been an officer of the Central Government in the rank of a Secretary to the Government of India.

In addition, there has been significant amount of work being done by several internationally funded NGOs working in India. These NGOs have all been focused on facilitating the accomplishment of the same goals of equality, respect and dignity for the underprivileged. Even if we were to say that the Government efforts have been inadequate, there have been compensatory forces working, we might say.

#### **Have we done enough?**

The question that often gets asked about equal opportunity

#### **Indian states whose SC/ST population exceeds 25%**

States	Percentage	States	Percentage
Sikkim	25.6	Chhattisgarh	43.4
West Bengal	28.5	Tripura	48.5
Himachal Pradesh	28.7	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	64.1
Punjab	28.9	Arunachal Pradesh	64.8
Rajasthan	29.8	Meghalaya	86.4
Madhya Pradesh	35.5	Nagaland	89.1
Manipur*	37.0	Mizoram	94.5
Jharkhand	38.1	Lakshadweep	94.5
Orissa	38.6	India	24.4

*Source: Primary Census Abstract : Census of India 2001*

*Note: \*Excludes Mao-Maram, Puomats and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district of Manipur*



in India is this - have we done enough?

Looking at what we have described above, in terms of ministries, organisations and programmes, policies and plans, we should say that a lot has been done. Going by statistics on the ground, the picture is otherwise.

The Human Development Report, 2004 has some significant insights to offer:

India's Human Development Index (HDI) rank (which focuses on three measurable dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life, being educated and having a decent standard of living) stood at 127 out of a total of 177 countries. Maldives came out higher at 84.

On the Human Poverty Index (HPI), which focuses on the proportion of people below a threshold level in basic dimensions of human development - living a long and healthy life, having access to education, and a decent standard of living, India ranks 48th among 95 developing countries for which the index has been calculated.

On the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) which measures inequalities in achievement between men and women, India ranks 103rd in the world. Sri Lanka came out better at 73rd rank.

This is where we stand after 58 years. In fact, when the Constitution was framed, most had intended for these concessions to last for about 10 to 15 years only. That was the period considered necessary to achieve the goal of liberation and equal opportunity. Fifty eight years later, if we continue to need such arrangements, all of us as citizens have to stand up and take the blame.

The reasons for poor results on the ground are many.

1. The execution gap in many of these programs
2. Politicisation of the cause

The lack of integration of these groups at a societal level and their continuing to carry discarded identities to date.

Those intended to benefit from these provisions do not seem happy and satisfied. Those against whom positive discrimination has been enforced also seem extremely peeved leading to social tensions.

## The Mandal Commission Report

Extracted from an article by Dinkar Sakrikar

The report of the Mandal Commission generated a furious controversy. Many attacked the Mandal Commission for adopting caste as the criteria for determining social and educational backwardness. This charge is ill-founded. In fact, the Commission, after a very thorough scientific investigation has with the help of experts from various disciplines worked out 11 indicators to determine social backwardness. These indicators are social, educational and economic, and as the major controversy revolves around the caste criteria allegedly adopted by the Commission, it would be relevant to reproduce the actual criteria used by the Commission. The 11 indicators formulated by the Commission are:

### Social

1. Castes/classes considered as socially backward by others.
2. Castes/classes which mainly depend on manual labour for their livelihood.
3. Castes/classes where the percentage of married women below 17 is 25% above the state average in rural areas and 10% in urban areas; and that of married men is 10% and 5% above the State average in rural and urban areas respectively.
4. Castes/classes where participation of females in work is at least 25% above the State average.

### Educational

5. Castes/classes where the number of children in the age group of 5 to 15 years who never attended school is at least 25% above the State average.
6. Castes/classes where the rate of student drop-out in the age group of 5-15 years is at least 25% above the State average.
7. Castes/classes amongst whom the proportion of matriculates is at least 25% below the State average

### Economic

8. Castes/classes where the average value of family assets is at least 25% below the State average.
9. Castes/classes where the number of families living in kachcha houses is at least 25 % above the State average.
10. Castes/classes where the source of drinking water is beyond half a kilometer for more than 50% of the households.
11. Castes/classes where the number of the households having taken a consumption loan is at least 25% above the State average.



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# Global experiences with affirmative action

Having looked at the Indian experience in the area, it would be useful to look at what the rest of the world has attempted and accomplished in the area of equal opportunity. Understanding the global initiatives will set in context what we have been attempting in India.

## *United States*

Affirmative action in the United States was originally conceived as a means to compensate African Americans for centuries of slavery, as newly granted legal equality was considered insufficient to redress African American grievances. However, the initiative quickly expanded to encompass various other racial minorities that had never suffered from slavery. In addition, newly immigrated Africans without any enslaved ancestors benefit as well. Thus the original justification, which the potential victims of affirmative action were initially compelled to accept, has been abandoned.

Though affirmative action in the US is primarily associated with racial issues, the *American civil rights movement* originally gave as its purpose the correction of a history of oppression against all working-class and low-income people.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered a famous speech at Howard University which became a national justification for moving the country beyond nondiscrimination to a more vigorous effort to improve the status of black Americans: "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." It was a counter-argument to the previously prevailing notion of meritocracy. The "skills" that merit-based admission rewards are cultivated in children by parents with money. Affirmative action was to be a method by which minorities could eventually develop those skills in their own children. In the 1960s and 1970s, affirmative action became overwhelmingly popular on campuses across America as mass student protests spurred schools to actively recruit minority applicants. Exuberance in the ideology led to colleges recruiting truly disadvantaged students from the ghettos assuming that they would fit in naturally. But these children did not adjust well to the sudden change and were unable to perform well. National excitement died down in the late 1970's and quickly became a national controversy. Over the decades, affirmative action has brought about vast improvement in the class stratification of minorities. From 1960 to 1995, according to data in "The Shape of the River" by William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, the percentage of blacks aged 25-29 who had graduated from college rose from 5.4 to 15.4 percent, the percentage of blacks in law school grew from below 1 to 7.5 percent, and the percentage of blacks in medical school

increased from 2.2 to 8.1 percent. However, the lingering problems from a history of black oppression are far from gone.

In the US, the law specifically requires certain organizations accepting federal funds to take affirmative action to increase employment of members of preferred racial or ethnic groups and women. Any organization with fifty or more employees and an aggregate revenue exceeding \$50,000 from federal contracts during a twelve month period must have a written affirmative action plan. This plan must include goals and timetables for achieving full utilization of women and members of racial minorities, in quotas based on an analysis of the current workforce compared to the availability in the general labor pool of women and members of racial minorities.

The order is enforced by the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs of the Employment Standards Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor and by the Office of Civil Rights of the Justice Department.

## *Malaysia-The Bumiputra program*

In Malaysia, certain pro-bumiputra policies exist that are a form of affirmative action. Bumiputra (Sanskrit, translated literally, it means "sons of the Earth") or sometimes spelled as Bumiputera is an official definition widely used in Malaysia, embracing ethnic Malays as well as other indigenous ethnic groups.

Examples of such policies include:

- A certain percentage of stock in publicly listed companies must be owned by Bumiputras.
- A certain percentage of housing in any development has to be sold to Bumiputra owners. Housing developers are required to provide a minimum discount to Bumiputra buyers of these lots. Fulfillment of this quota is often by ear-marking less desirable properties as "bumiputra lots".
- A basket of government guaranteed and run mutual funds are available for purchase by Bumiputra buyers only.
- Many government tendered projects require that companies submitting tenders be bumiputra owned.

Some argue that the legal and economic advantages were necessary for Malaysia to reduce ethnic conflict and insure that economic opportunity in Malaysia was evenly distributed.

Yet, many of the policies seem to strive for equality of results than equality of opportunity. This can be seen by the targets set, for example 30% of all equity in Bumiputra hands is attempting for equality of results. 30% of Bumiputras trained and certified to run companies would represent a better equality in terms of opportunity.

Despite such policies for nearly half a century the Bumiputras today do not seem to have "arrived".

## *Oman-The policy of Omanisation*

The Omani Government has embarked on what it calls



"Omanisation" as a part of its sixth 5-year plan, launched in 2000, to reduce its dependence on oil and expatriate labor.

The plan focuses on

- Income diversification,
- Job creation for Omanis in the private sector, and
- Development of Oman's interior.

What is of interest to note is that this program focuses on training of the Omani populace to learn the skills and take up the jobs that have so far gone to expats.

Government programs offer soft loans and propose the building of new industrial estates in population centers outside the capital area. The government is giving greater emphasis to "Omanisation" of the labor force, particularly in banking, hotels, and municipally sponsored shops benefiting from government subsidies. Currently, efforts are underway to liberalize investment opportunities in order to attract foreign capital.

#### *Emiratisation*

The process of emiratisation has been pursued aggressively by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, UAE over the last few years with some success, in sectors such as telecommunications and banking. In April 1999 an agreement giving priority to graduates of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in recruitment for jobs in both the public and private sectors was signed between HCT and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. However, the Ministry is in favor of simultaneous development of the economy and human resources and is reluctant to alienate the private sector by forcing a quota for employment of nationals.

#### *South Africa*

Affirmative action in South Africa is guided by the provisions of the Employment Equity Act that applies to any employer with 50 or more workers.

The Act makes sure that qualified designated groups have equal opportunities. The Act defines "suitably qualified" as a compilation of a person's formal qualifications, prior learning, relevant experience, and/or capacity to acquire within a reasonably short timer the ability to do the job. Employers must also draw up an Employment Equity Plan covering 1-5 years with the Affirmative Action that they would be taking.

The Act is equally applicable to discrimination based on race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, family responsibility, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, HIV status, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language and birth.

#### *Other nations' experiences*

**Greece:** Greece has quotas setting a lower limit for women participating in election lists of political parties for most of the election processes.

**New Zealand:** Individuals of Maori or other Polynesian descent are often afforded preferential access to university courses, and scholarships.

**Southeast Asia:** In countries such as Indonesia, affirmative action programs give natives preference over Han Chinese who have immigrated into the country.

**United Kingdom:** Under the 1998 Good Friday Agreement the law requires that the Police Service of Northern Ireland recruit equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants (including Anglicans).

**Germany:** Article 3 of the German constitution provides for equal rights of all people regardless of sex or race. In recent years there has been a long public debate about whether to issue programs that would grant women a privileged access to jobs in order to fight discrimination. There were programs stating that if men and women had equal qualifications, women had to be preferred for a job. The anti-discrimination law (Antidiskriminierungsgesetz - ADG), which is yet to pass, aims at improving the protection of minorities.

**Japan:** the Law on Securing of Equal Opportunity and Treatment between Men and Women in Employment issued first in 1972, provided that men and women should have equal chances in employment. Most workers are still male.

**So, the next time there is talk about affirmative action, think again. India is not alone in this journey.**

### **Equal Opportunity & Corporate Social Responsibility**

There is a lot of talk about corporate social responsibility these days. Organisations are expected to demonstrate their commitment to reach out to the communities that they operate in and make a difference.

In our view, demonstrating commitment to equal opportunity is one of the most important and even primary corporate social responsibilities.

Organisations will need to go beyond the usual refrain of "meritocracy" and make conscious efforts to secure equal opportunities. In fact, the so called meritocracy plank of many organisations is quite often questioned and arguably so. How can we talk about a meritocracy when most hiring decisions cannot stand scrutiny for objectivity? How can we talk about a meritocracy when organisations in India continue to hire from communities that the owners belong to. What merit can we uphold when in fact, organisations outsource mindlessly and in any case have no control over the hiring process? Freedom and flexibility to hire at will are quite often passed on as merit.

With all future employment likely to come only from the private sector, organised or otherwise, there will be pressure on these organisations to not only demonstrate transparency but also facilitate access to these opportunities through proactive measures.

### **The case of Sakthi Trading Company: Focusing on abilities**

Sakthi Trading Company has integrated disabled persons into its corporate vision. More than one-fifth of its employees are persons with disabilities.

Sakthi Trading Company is familiar to most of us through its brand of Sakthi Masalas. The company follows H.R. policies that have the right ingredients for a successful and responsible company.

The company was founded by P.C. Duraisamy 27 years ago with a meagre investment of Rupees 10,000. Today, it



generates a turnover of Rs 331 million. Behind the financial success lies a story of great commitment to the cause of persons with disability.

Of the 500-strong workforce of Sakthi Trading Company, 103 are disabled persons. What's more, the company employs people with all kind of disabilities: currently it has 35 persons with visual impairments, 10 with hearing impairments, 50 orthopaedically disabled and 8 persons with mental disabilities.

Sakthi Trading Company is acutely aware of the ground realities for disabled persons seeking employment. Its culture reflects the concern and devotion to principles of equal opportunity. The work areas of the company are accessible through ramps and railings. The toilets have spaces specially designed for people with disability. Physiotherapy and electrotherapy are available for employees and children with disabilities. They call it "Special arrangements for special people".

The work has been divided to suit persons with specific disabilities. While people with orthopaedic impairment are responsible for packaging, visually impaired persons are given jobs that utilise their tactile functions such as sorting and peeling. Persons with mental disability are given routine mechanical jobs that do not require complex decision-making.

The goal is to make all disabled people independent and impart a sense of pride in them. The result is visible in the beaming faces of its employees.

Sakthi Trading Company has endured hardships and harassments in its unbending commitment to correct corporate behaviour. Today, it is poised to play a leading role in the global market for spices. And in the wake of its success ride 'special people' of a very special organisation.

### The case of IBM - Diversity as Strategy

IBM's turnaround in the last decade is an impressive and well-documented business story. But behind that success is a less told people story, which explains how the corporation

dramatically altered its already diverse composition and created millions of dollars in new business. By the time Lou Gerstner took the helm in 1993, IBM had a long history of progressive management when it came to civil rights and equal-opportunity employment. But Gerstner felt IBM wasn't taking full advantage of a diverse market for talent, nor was it maximizing the potential of its diverse customer and employee base. So in 1995, he launched a diversity task force initiative to uncover and understand differences among people within the organization and find ways to appeal to an even broader set of employees and customers.

Gerstner established a task force for each of eight constituencies: Asians; blacks; the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered community; Hispanics; white men; Native Americans; people with disabilities; and women. He asked the task forces to research four questions: What does your constituency need to feel welcome and valued at IBM? What can the corporation do, in partnership with your group, to maximize your constituency's productivity? What can the corporation do to influence your constituency's buying decisions so that IBM is seen as a preferred solution provider? And with which external organizations should IBM form relationships to better understand the needs of your constituency? The answers to these questions became the basis for IBM's diversity strategy.

Thomas stresses that four factors are key to implementing any major change initiative:

- strong support from company leaders
- an employee base that is fully engaged with the initiative
- management practices that are integrated and aligned with the effort and
- a strong and well-articulated business case for action.

All four elements have helped IBM make diversity a key corporate strategy tied to real growth.



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# Equal Opportunity India - The totus event

What happens when a group of 40 passionate and engaged professionals voluntarily come together and use their collective wisdom to critically examine a theme close to their hearts? The result is enlightenment, new insights and new openings.

On December 10, 2004 on the 56th anniversary of the World Human Rights Day, this is what happened. totus consulting, took the initiative of organizing a participative search event, titled "Equal Opportunity India" (focus private sector) - Finding a win-win solution.

Here is a summary of the event deliberations.

The event consisted of about 40 select participants who represented the "whole system" and included CEOs / Leaders of Employing Organisations, HR professionals, Opinion leaders and representatives of non-profit social development organisations, HR and Placement consultants.

## Design

The event started with a brief presentation of the themes and the core issues that needed discussion.

This was followed by an intensive small group discussion where groups consisting of diverse members discussed threadbare the themes and sub-themes, added personal insights and experiences and came up with specific ideas for action.

## A. Summary of the event deliberations

The half day event threw up the following five important pointers for further exploration and action.

1. Awareness, understanding and education is the place to start
2. Equal opportunity is all about upholding human values
3. Equal opportunity is all about creating new possibilities
4. Measurement and incentives are the keys to progress
5. Corporate social responsibility is more than charity.

### 1. Awareness, understanding and education

What was most heartening about the event was the fact that a large number of key representatives from NGOs participated and had an opportunity for their voice to be heard and more importantly understood. For the business leaders, entrepreneurs and HR leaders who were present, it was an eye opener.

What stunned, surprised and humbled the co-authors was the lack of awareness and lack of clarity on what the problem was and appreciation of the magnitude involved. Everyone conceded that the ignorance, compounded by prejudices, opinions and ill-conceived views aired by many seemed to make matters worse. Everyone accepted that they knew very little about the subject.

A big part of the problem seems to be about not knowing

what the problem is. Is reservation the problem? Going by reports and reactions, it certainly was made out to be one. In the event, it came out loud and clear that reservation was not the problem. The event clearly defined "lack of equal opportunity" as the real problem. Reservation was only one of the possible solutions to address this. The event also held that, if real change has to happen, equal opportunity has to be accepted and owned by all as a vision for our country. More than rhetoric, the facts stared everyone in the face.

In fact Prof. Sukhdeo Thorat, drew attention to the work of Akerlof, Scaville and Lall who maintained that caste based market discrimination generated unequal income distribution and induced poverty, particularly among the discriminated social groups but also adversely affected economic growth. It has been proved that this ended up creating less than optimum economic outcome and affected market competitiveness.

This negates the argument of most CEOs that creating equal employment opportunity will create an uncompetitive Indian economy.

At a deeper level, awareness had to include sensitivity to the impact of one's actions, like for instance, apparel makers being aware of the conditions of cotton farmers, organisations being sensitive to the needs of physically challenged people in designing their buildings, corporates favoring people belonging to their communities and so on. Cases were quoted by co-authors to stress the point.

It was suggested that equal opportunity be introduced as a special subject right from schools so that there was mass awareness. It was also felt that women could play a very important role in changing the mindset of society.

What was very interesting was the candid sharing by many of the participants about their own personal prejudices and biases as they grew up and how life experiences had helped them change these perceptions.

### 2. Equal opportunity is all about upholding human values

During the small group discussion, a lot of time was spent on sharing personal experiences, stories and insights about the practice of equal opportunity or lack of it. Participants narrated personal experiences of themselves, their family members, their educational institutions or their organisations practicing some form of discrimination, in terms of not fulfilling others' needs to live a dignified life or demeaning their dignity of labour, the right to work, the right to protection, the right to education and so on.

Discrimination in employment practices was a manifestation of deeper prejudices that each one of us has it was felt. It was also felt by all the co-authors that we would need to tackle our own inner demons, prejudices & perceptions, and that cleansing at a superficial level, while



important, would need to be augmented by personal change.

While it may be convenient to blame the politicians, it was evident that each of us has a role to play and in fact have abundant opportunities to uphold these values. It emerged that it was an unwillingness to uphold these values which was exploited by the politicians.

The event highlighted the fact that equal opportunity was all about upholding human values which are not just meant to be protected by the Constitution or other Declarations but are also seen as the fabric of basic civilisation. Co-authors brought up some interesting ideas like having the courage to speak & confront discriminatory actions with family, friends and colleagues, constantly questioning our actions, spending at least a day every month to promote awareness, working in rural areas to create a deeper self awareness and so on.

### **3. Equal opportunity is all about creating new possibilities**

One of the participants shared the fable of the "Fox and the Stork" (where the Fox invited the Stork for a meal and offered food on a flat plate) to drive home the point that equal opportunity was about creating new possibilities.

One of the biggest objections to equal opportunity from business leaders and industry forums has been about the anxiety of losing meritocracy. This argument was shredded to pieces. It was in fact seen as little more than an excuse; given that most of the recruitment in the private sector was done through informal sources using means and methods that would not stand any level of scrutiny.

At the next level, it was felt that the least that organisations could do was to make the effort to seek out good talent rather than be restricted in the search options. For instance, for the first time, we are seeing corporates taking efforts to hire from small towns, given the shortage of talent in the metros. If this could work well albeit out of necessity, it would certainly help if they make similar efforts to seek out talent even among the disadvantaged groups. Jayshree of Ability Foundation was a lot more emphatic. She pleaded that organisations look at "capability" and "not disability". The bottom line was that recruitment could continue to focus on the best but make the reach wider and the process more transparent.

There was also extensive debate on how you could make underprivileged people more employable. This is where a lot of the discussion focused on education. One of the CEOs shared his company's experience of training underprivileged children to work in their retail outlets and being extremely satisfied with the experience, while creating a steady supply source of good and talented employees.

### **4. Measurement and Incentives are the keys to progress**

While the spirit of volunteerism, affirmative action and corporate initiatives were all welcome, it was felt that in the absence of a concrete standard, it would not be possible to measure how well all the stakeholders were doing in promoting the cause of equal opportunity.

Somebody quoted the example of the Minimum Wages Act. While we can trust organisations to pay their employees

well, the Minimum Wages Act at least ensures a minimum standard, something against which organisations can measure themselves.

55 years after the Indian constitution assured its citizens protection against discrimination, the statistics do not reflect adequate progress.

It was felt that while voluntary action was certainly good, it was often isolated and did not build the sustained pressure that is required for action. Reservations had to be viewed against this context, it was felt. Emphasizing reservations at least ensured that some minimum standards were adhered to. Cynicism about law should not come in the way of setting standards and benchmarks, it was felt.

Those present came to the view that reservations and legislations were not a bad thing and perhaps inevitable if no real action was evident on the ground.

It was felt that "sweeteners" could be introduced to encourage companies to create equal employment opportunity, in addition to creating basic reservation laws. These sweeteners could include tax breaks, benefits in getting investment, concessions in export, land & so on. This would be a true win-win situation, it was felt.

Many interesting ideas were suggested to enforce reservation and legislation.

For instance, it was felt that organisations could be asked to openly declare the workforce mix, and this could be monitored by NGOs. There would be no punitive action for non-compliance but this would bring about social pressure.

### **5. Corporate social responsibility is more than charity.**

Given the important role that private industries were going to be playing in the coming years, it was felt that corporates had an important role in furthering the cause of equal opportunity. In fact, promoting equal opportunity was seen as an important element of corporate society responsibility (CSR). However, it was felt that the current mindset of viewing CSR as charity had to change. It was clarified that it was not charity but responsibility. Corporates not only had a profit target but a social target to fulfill, it was held unanimously.

## **B. Closing**

Equal Opportunity India was a very small and humble beginning in building consensus and fruitfully engaging all the stakeholders in a debate. Most importantly, Equal Opportunity achieved the objective of bringing clarity to what the real issues were, giving it a positive orientation and sensitizing everyone to the enormity of the task ahead. totus offered its support in helping hold similar events in other cities and educational institutions to spread awareness and bring greater understanding about how we could work towards creating an Equal Opportunity India.



## Privileged lens and Equal Opportunity Dialogue

**totus consulting invited Bhanumathy Vasudevan, founder of "Mayyam", an organisation working with Dalit tribal and other minority women, to share her perspective about equal opportunity from a human and social and behavioural perspective and thanks her for her generous contribution which we present here**

When we view India from an integrated perspective, it is hard to call it 'poor', 'under developed' or 'developing' nation. It depends on what benchmarks we use to assess our nation in these largely prevalent terms. When we take a vantage point to view India from all aspects such as intellectual and economic resources, indigenous knowledge and wisdom, skills and talents that are technical, social and life related, diversity of people, language, region, ethnicity etc, emotional tenacity and maturity and many such strengths in spite of thousands of years of invasion and last but not least the three hundred years of colonisation. We can engage in dialogue on inequity in wealth, casteism, less value for life in general, the growing nature of population, the legacy of bureaucracy, numerous political parties, etc which are pulling us down in many ways currently.

When we say 'India' what is often operating in our minds is the India in the metros, the corporate India that is hardly 20-25% of India. The rest of the rural India and even some of the states such as north-eastern states and the border districts are mostly missing in our consciousness and perspectives due to our particular education, culture and conditioning.

Mostly the urban and semi urban middle and upper class are products of colonisation and our psyche is colonised to view English better than any other native languages, the indigenous ways of life as embarrassing compared to the civilian ways of the British influenced culture, the yearning for everything white in complexion, food products such as rice, sugar, etc, the premium given to 'white' and their language and many such forms one can think of. In 1870 British parliament passed a resolution when Lord Macaulay proposed to create a class of brown people in India who will speak, think, and behave like British in India who will then become their allies. (Refer 'The Great Indian Middle Class' by Verma). Most of us - the educated middle class participating in this dialogue are products of this resolution whether our ancestors lived in rural or urban areas during British Colonisation. Our parents are products of this culture and many of us are the products of their upbringing and carry countless filters of perception on each subject. Our psyche is generally colonised to think in particular ways and it requires training and willingness to view and think in alternate ways.

I am here in particular dialoguing on mostly how the Indian casteist society irrespective of what religions we practice, operates in our socio-economic life over many centuries and how they are internalised and live through us. The caste structure is embedded in us and remains mostly unconscious. Many times we say we have nothing to do with caste practices in our modern lives. But the feeling of privilege and the biases and stereotypes exist in us unconsciously and acts out. In the ways we live our lives as a privileged class. Brahmanical behaviour and practices irrespective of what caste or religion we belong to is not just applicable for India alone. It is a global phenomenon of insidious layers of oppression among humans. The term 'Boston Brahmins' referring to the notions of superiority is one such example. In India it has taken deep roots into our psyche all the more. One such account of oppression in interior southern India way back in 1882 is the research study of Lord Trevelyan on socio economic relationship of the rural middle class and the poorer communities such as Panchamars (the caste off community as not part of the four castes under varnashram in the practice of Hinduism and now

referred as Dalits), indigenous people (referred as Adi Dravidian) and tribes. British termed them together as depressed class. The research study revealed these communities lived as slaves of the land owning middle class. The land owning class grabbed the lands given to them by the British to support their livelihood (Panchami lands). This point was brought to light in the study from the references in the sale deeds of the lands which said 'I hereby sell all my agricultural lands, the wells, orchards, forest, lands, trees, treasures hidden, stones and my slaves who work on these fields'. The slavery was also not exclusive to the U.S., which enslaved the African communities.

The other study done in the households of Bangalore by an NGO in 2002 revealed most of the homes practice separate eating plates and cups for those who come as 'house helpers'. We mostly still call them servants with least consciousness while actually they are 'house help' who have come to do agreed work and not to serve as handmaidens. We are still struggling with the difference between 'servants' and 'house help' as a separate professional work. The embedded notions of superiority and caste structure acts through such behaviours.

In the dialogue of equal opportunities it is important to keep in mind this backdrop and the ways in which our unconscious mind operates within and in the society and it needs acknowledgement and acceptance to get new perspectives and alternative ways of thinking. The stereotypical responses of "How can we take people below standards because of their background?" need rethinking. It is time we asked ourselves what preparations need to be in place in education systems to help these poorer caste communities to gain equal opportunity. There is no research to say IQ of these communities are low but rather the indigenous wisdom might still be available as fresh breath of air. Are we going to set standards for equal opportunities based on good English, British manners, soft speech and non-dissent, etc? On the contrary in my experience, there are more talents awaiting us in these sections of un-colonised, non-convent educated, earth friendly communities, fresh springs of spontaneity, creativity, indigenous wisdom to think holistically and above all a keen learning attitude for mutual learning.

I bring just one example from a rural locale when we were working on soil and water conservation projects. An old woman talked about eight different soil types and what their soil type is about. The soil expert travelling with us was stunned to hear from an old rural woman, what he had learnt in his college. My intention is not to mystify or make them 'the exotic other' but to 'see' the dis-privileged communities with the new lens.

What is most rudimentary requisite for an equal opportunity dialogue is to acknowledge our judging filtered colonised mindsets which live in us and be aware to think in alternative ways that guide us towards equal opportunity platforms and practices individually and in the systems we belong. Accepting our privileged positions in society and the dis-privileged background of many rural Indians and the oppressed communities of Dalit and indigenous people as an existing current reality that needs work is the first step towards building equal opportunities. This also requires practices that demand life style changes and reorganisation of the base of privileges. It is a tough demand based on human values to live a humane life.

### In closing

Speaking on the issue of providing a ten year window for reservations, Dr B. R. Ambedkar said, "All I want to say to them (those who believed it should end in ten years) in the words of Edmund Burke is "large empires and small minds go ill together".

Over the years, India has seen vehement protagonists and antagonists to the theme of positive discrimination in any form. Obviously, there has been little

consensus at a societal level on how to address the need. That the need still exists seems evident from the fund of information available. There is little available analysis about the impact of the programs this far and what seems to have gone right or wrong.

What is certainly evident is the fact that for any meaningful progress, the shift has to happen first in the minds. We do hope that this issue of UTB has helped make this shift, in a very small way.

## about totus

We are a strategic HR consulting firm that partners with organisations by designing HR solutions that meet their business needs.

Using our expertise in conceptualising, designing and implementing end-to-end HR solutions in a variety of business contexts, we help organisations harness their potential and manage their growth. Thought Leadership and Implementation Excellence are the two pillars on which we build our solutions.

## HR@work

This core end-to-end offering from totus addresses the needs of the following clearly defined customer groups:

- ◇ **Interim support for start-ups:**  
totus has the expertise in providing interim HR support to start-ups of any size and complexity.
- ◇ **Institutionalisation support for SMEs, Professional Entrepreneurs and Family Businesses:**  
totus has been working closely with CEOs of SMEs, entrepreneurs & business owners to provide them strategic and operational solutions meant to help institutionalise their HR and organisation building processes.
- ◇ **Improvement support for all Organisations:**  
totus has been working with the CEOs of a wide variety and size of organisations to assist them in their organisational restructuring, change management and performance improvement efforts.

An HR@work engagement would typically last from three to twelve months depending on the complexity involved and the maturity of existing systems. The scope is highly customized to meet the Organisation's needs and covers a wide spectrum of human resource initiatives including:

- |                             |                              |   |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| ✕ Organisation Design       | ✕ Workforce Management       | ✕ 360-Degree Feedback Systems             |
| ✕ Job Design & Capabilities | ✕ Career Development Systems | ✕ Employee Satisfaction & Sensing Surveys |
| ✕ Performance Management    | ✕ HR Function Development    | ✕ Coaching                                |
| ✕ Compensation & Benefits   | ✕ Change Management          | ✕ Service Quality                         |
| ✕ Staffing                  |                              |   |

## Learning@work

**Learning@work** is totus consulting's learning solution. totus specialises in designing industry specific learning systems to facilitate multi-location distributed learning. Run as branded programs, they institutionalise learning and put the organisation - and the learner - in charge.

The specific Learning@work offerings include:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ◇ Top management workshops for consensus building     | ◇ Change management workshops  |
| ◇ Customized leadership development program           | ◇ Career development programs  |
| ◇ Coaching programs                                   | ◇ Design of training modules   |
| ◇ Training trainers and facilitators                  | ◇ Capability framework development                                   |
| ◇ Developing systems for assessment and certification | ◇ Assessment Centres   |
| ◇ 360 degree feedback systems                         | ◇ Assessment of learning impact on the individual & the organisation |

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