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Affirmative Action in Higher Education: Insights from Recent Empirical Research¹

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Introduction

Affirmative action, especially in the form of reservation policies, to address the issues of inclusion and equity has been in place in India for a long time. Through these policies, higher participation of the marginalised groups is sought in the political, educational and employment related domains. Over the years the scope and coverage of these reservation policies has been enlarged through the inclusion of new social groups and by incorporating new 'spaces' hitherto not available to certain social groups. Reservation has been available to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) ever since our Constitution was adopted. These policies, initially perceived as temporary, have not only persisted but have grown in scope and coverage. Other Backward Classes (OBCs) received the benefit of reservation, first in the employment space and more recently in the education domain.

The available evidence suggests that the policies of reservation have not been an unqualified success. Indeed, implementation of the reservation policies has faced a variety of issues ranging from problems of identifying the beneficiary groups and the creamy layer to legal interpretation of constitutional provisions. For example, carry-over of unutilised quota and reservation in promotions have seen significant legal activity. Moreover, sub-categories are sought to be created in each segment to address the concern that the most marginalised are not benefiting from the reservation policies.

Apart from uneven participation of marginalised groups in the three domains which has resulted in the demand for creation of sub-categories, recent studies have highlighted that the social hierarchy

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and conditions which formed the basis of affirmative action are not stable and are undergoing a change in India.

Given the above, this Issue Brief suggests that we need to rethink the scope and coverage of affirmative action (read reservation). While it focuses on higher education, similar methods and ideas can be potentially extended to the spaces of employment and politics.

Measures of Participation in Higher Education (HE)

Empirical studies undertaken by ORF (see references in footnote 1) have highlighted that the use of appropriate measures of participation in higher education is critical to undertake any meaningful analysis of differentials in such participation across social groups. These studies have shown that measures of participation in higher education need to be more nuanced than those that have been used in recent years. The first distinction that needs to be made is between attainment and enrolment. While the former captures the segment that has completed graduate and higher level of education, the latter focuses on the segment that is currently undertaking higher education. In addition, while attainment is a stock measure and carries the 'burden of history'⁴, enrolment is a flow measure that captures the current situation and provides indications for the future. Three measures of participation for any population segment seem relevant:

1. Share of graduates and higher degree holders in the population group above 20 years of age, which characterises an All Generations' Stock (AGS) measure of participation in higher education; a higher share signifying higher participation.
2. Share of graduates and higher educated in the age group of 22–35 years provides the Current Generation Stock (CGS) measure;
3. Share of currently studying persons at the level of graduation and above in the age group of 17–29 years provides a Current Generation Flow (CGF) measure of participation in higher education.

For all these measures, a higher share signifies higher participation and if the share in population for a specific group is higher than its share in graduates (or currently studying), the group suffers from a 'deficit' in participation. For example, if the share of a group in the total population in a specific cohort is 50 per cent but their share of graduates in the same age group is only 25 per cent, there exists a deficit of 25 percentage points.

Moreover, while measuring deficits, it is useful to consider the eligibility for participating in HE. Eligibility requirement for enrolment in an under-graduate course is to complete higher secondary education. Thus, instead of only focusing on the entire population in the relevant age group, measures of participation should also focus on that segment that has crossed the threshold of higher secondary education and can potentially go to college. Accordingly, the three measures can be defined

for the eligible population. A sharper focus on the eligible population brings the links between secondary (school) and tertiary (college) education explicitly into the analytical discussion.

Defining Socio-religious Categories (SRCs)

Extending the categories defined by the Sachar Committee, our work on higher education combines caste and religious status of individuals to define seven broad Socio-religious Categories (SRCs). These are: Hindu Scheduled Caste (SC), Hindu Scheduled Tribe (ST), Hindu Other backward Classes (OBC), Hindu Upper Caste (UC), Muslim OBC, Muslim General (MG) and Other Minorities (OM). Due to paucity of representation from religious backgrounds other than Hindu and Muslim, we combine observations from all other religions to one group, that is, Other Minorities. One of the key focus areas of our work has been the analysis of deficits across these SRCs.

Correlates of Participation in Higher Education

Analysis of the National Sample Survey data for the period 1999-2010 shows some interesting patterns. The deficits for Hindu OBC and to some extent Hindu ST are not very high, particularly when one looks at the currently studying or eligible population. In 2004-05, the share of Hindu OBC was 25.6 per cent among the total graduates in the age group 22-35 years; their share was even higher (28.2 per cent) among the currently studying persons. (see Figures 1a, 1b and 1c).

Eligibility turned out to be a critical factor for participation in higher education. Deficits for the under-privileged groups are significantly lower among the eligible population, even after we control for a variety of other factors. Thus, once persons from underprivileged groups cross the school threshold, the chances of their going to college are quite high. This suggested that a better understanding of the constraints on school education is critical if participation in higher education is to be enhanced.

Figure 1a

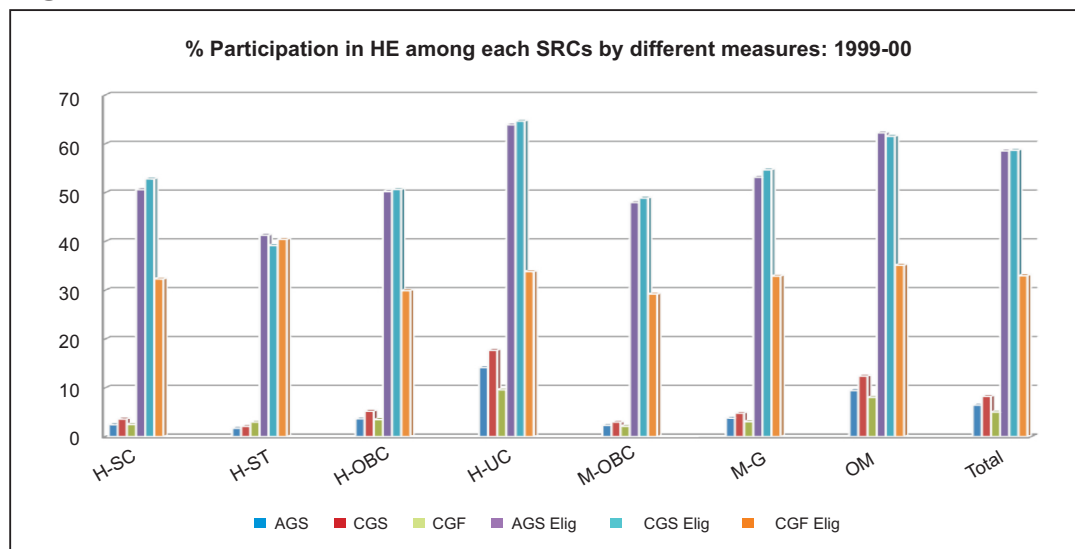


Figure 1b

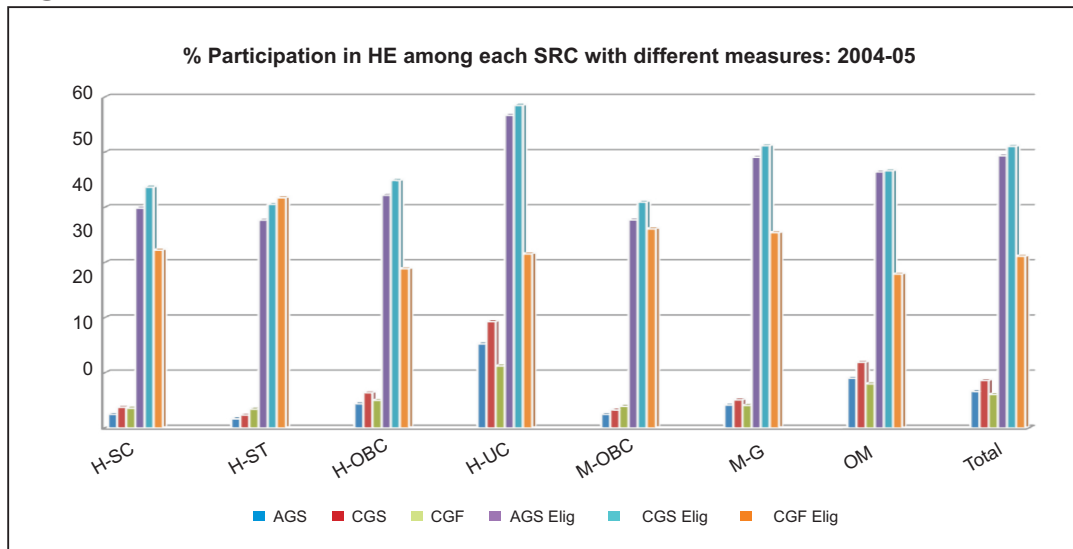
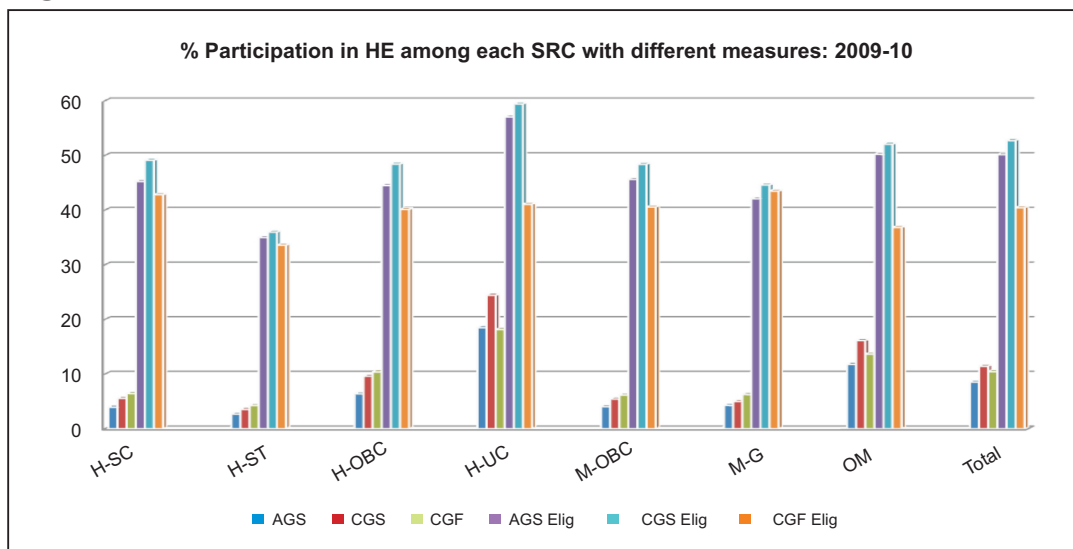


Figure 1c



The econometric analyses conducted by us showed that once other factors like household economic status, region and parental education are controlled for, inter-SRC differences in the probability of participation decline significantly (see Figures 3a and 4a). There is also evidence to suggest that the supply side factors positively affect the participation of various groups in higher education presumably through the process of enhancing eligibility.

The HE participation rates (proportion of population participating in the relevant cohort) increase with level of parental education as shown in figures 2a and 2b. Further econometric estimates reveal that chances of participation in HE increase significantly with parental education and is the highest with parents with a graduate education. This effect persists even after controlling for household expenditures (a proxy for income or the economic status), region, gender and socio-religious affiliation (caste and religion, which forms the basis for reservation or discussions around reservation⁵). In fact, the impact of parental education (higher secondary and above) seems to be higher than that of the SRC status in both rural and urban areas (See Figures 3a, 3b, 4a and 4b).

Figure 2a

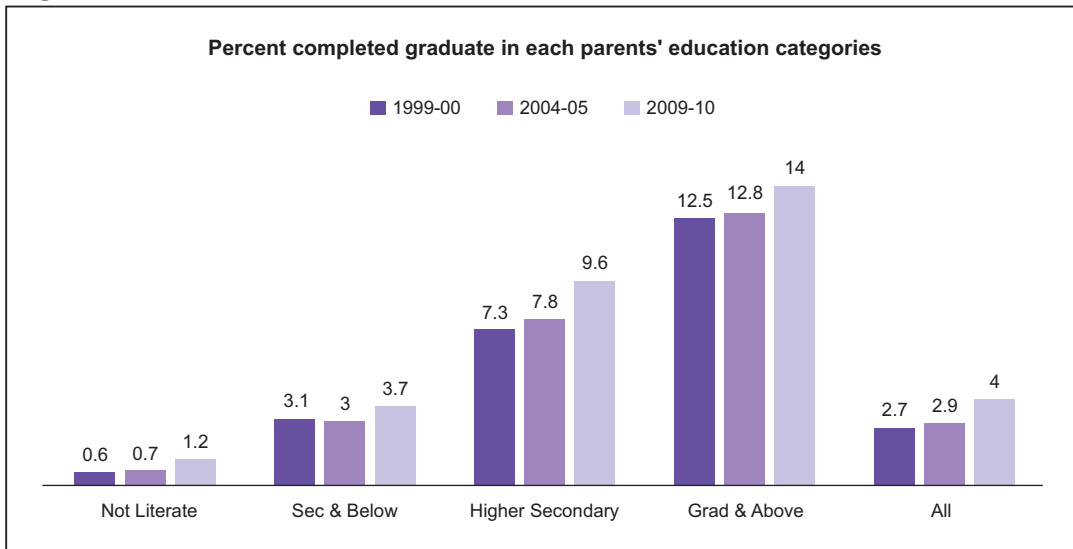


Figure 2b

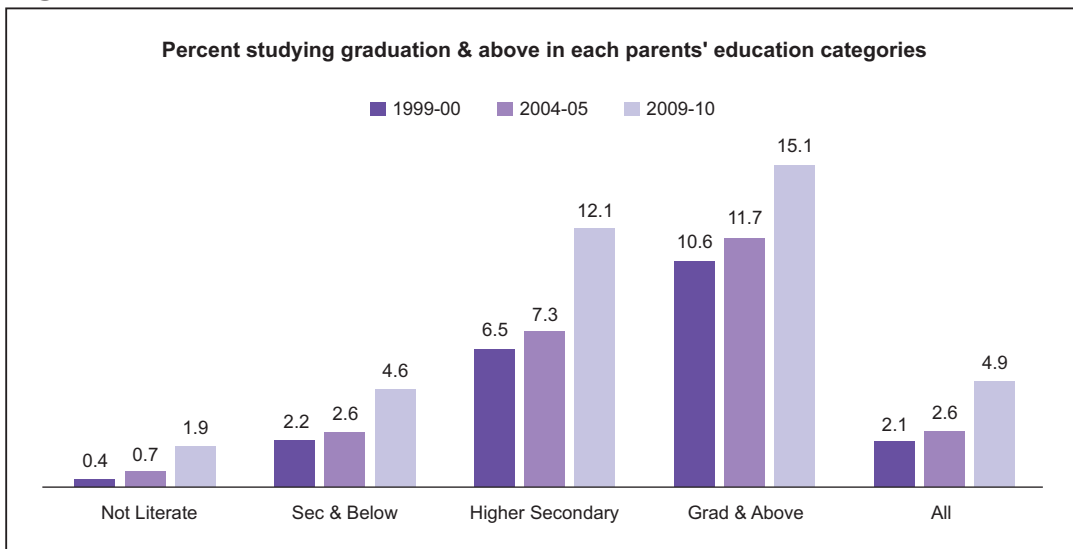


Figure 3a

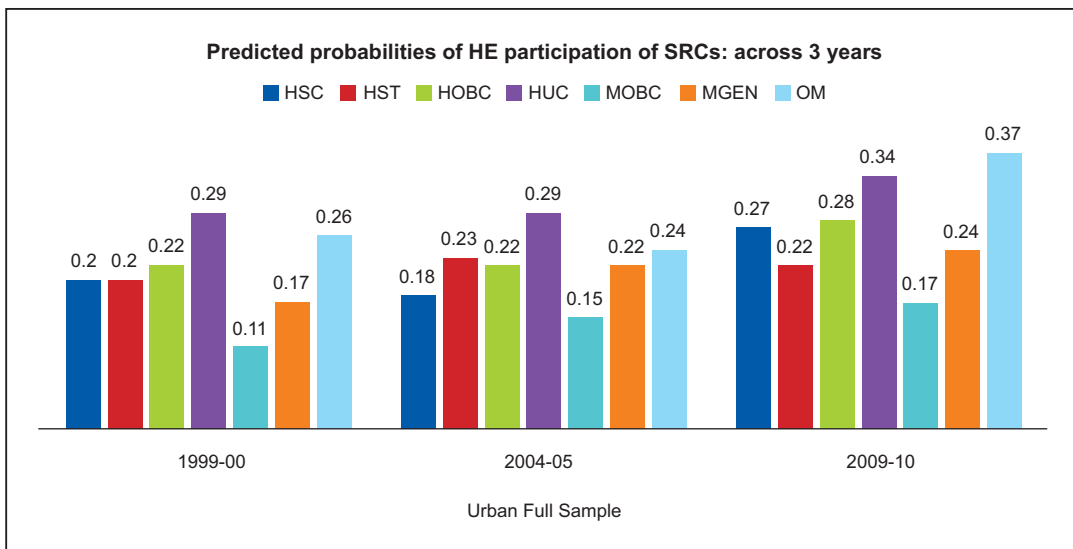


Figure 3b

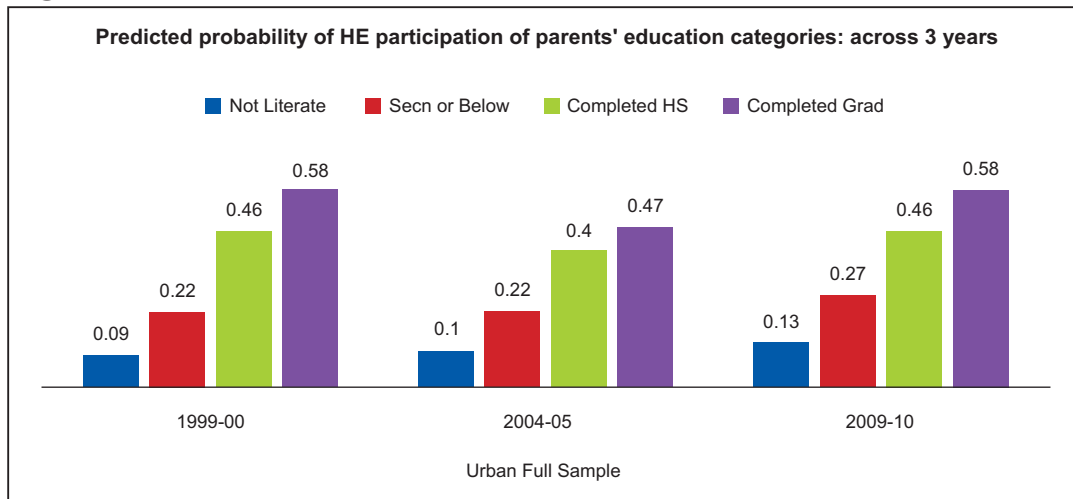


Figure 4a

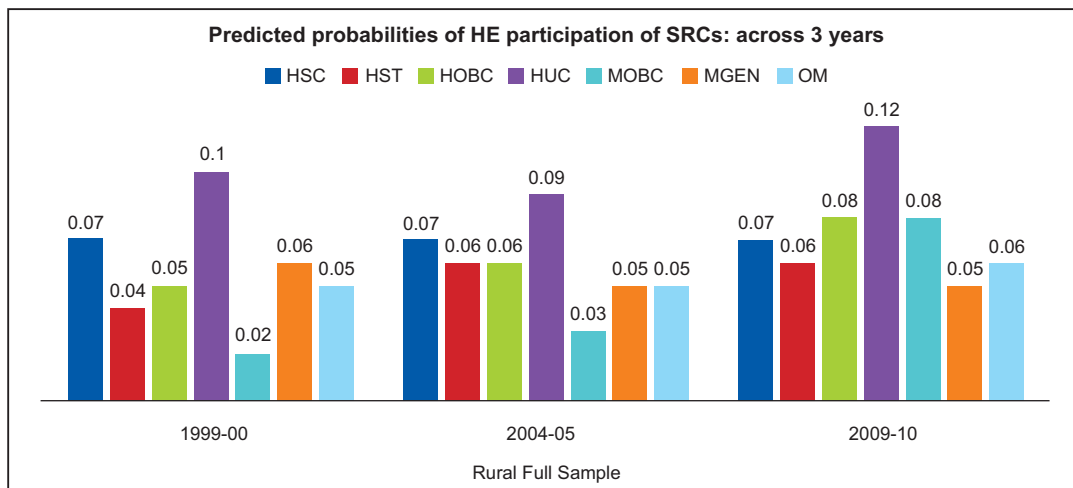
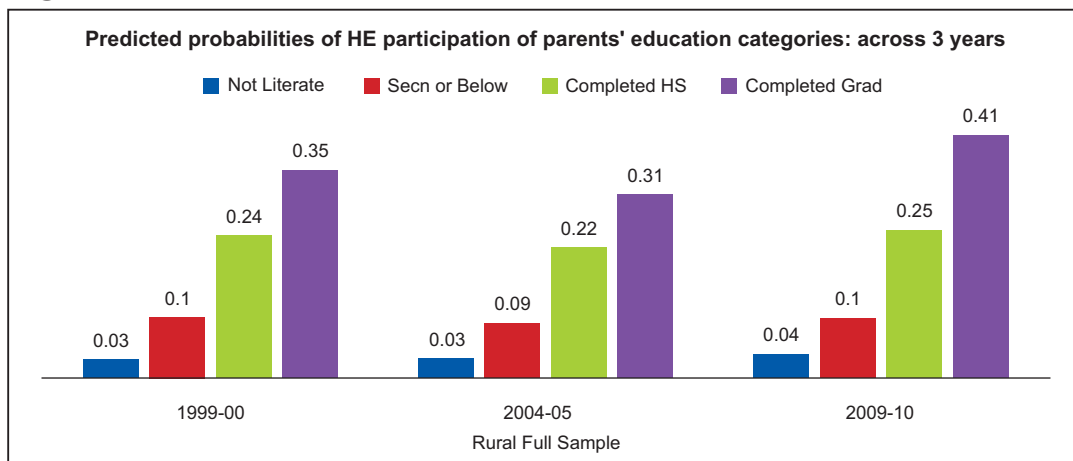


Figure 4b



Moreover, while the inter-SRC differences in chances of participation in HE over last 10 years in both rural and urban areas have undergone changes (as evidenced from the predicted probabilities in figure 3a and 4a), the differences across parental education categories (as evidenced in Figure 3b and 4b) have remained more or less stable.

Policy Imperatives

One critical policy question relates to the linkage between affirmative action as practiced by policies of reservation in India and the levels of participation in HE. Should such affirmative action be linked to deficits of respective groups? If yes, what type of deficits should one go by? For example, our data showed that going by our definition, the deficits for Hindu OBC are not very high, particularly when one looks at the currently studying or eligible population. Moreover, our analysis showed that once other factors are controlled for, inter-SRC differences decline dramatically and the 'hierarchy of deprivation' is not entirely clear empirically. This supports the argument that a better understanding of the relative deficits across SRCs may be critical for a more nuanced policy of affirmative action, including reservation.

Furthermore, our findings highlight the importance of the policy focus on ensuring eligibility for higher education. Deficits for the underprivileged are found to be significantly lower among the eligible population, even after we control for a variety of other factors. Thus, once persons from underprivileged groups cross the school threshold, their chances of going to college are quite high. Clearly, a better understanding of the constraints on school education is critical if participation in higher education is to be enhanced. Therefore, the HE policy needs to focus on ensuring that the threshold is crossed.

Arguably, reservation in higher education is an incentive to cross the school threshold; students from the reserved categories may complete school with the hope that they have a higher chance of getting admission in institutions of higher education due to quotas. Similarly, one can argue that job reservation can enhance the incentives to participate in higher education by increasing the probability of finding employment in the state sector after completing education. Are these adequate reasons? Work undertaken by several scholars has supported the argument that the efficacy of reservation policies depends on other complementary instruments that ensure better academic preparation and financial support. If at all reservation is seen as a primary form of affirmative action, it needs to be complemented by scholarships, fee waivers and training programmes that can prepare students from marginal groups to cope with the academic rigour of the programme.

Since the deficits are changing over time, should the reservation policies be revised frequently to reflect the change in participation among eligible underprivileged? Our empirical findings raise questions about the efficacy of socio-religious affiliation being the sole focus of affirmative action. Since many other factors other than socio-religious affiliation also influence participation in HE in a significant manner, an exclusive focus on such affiliation for affirmative action seems inappropriate. The importance of economic background as well as that of location highlights the role of the supply side factors in affecting the participation of various groups in HE.

Given the high information requirements for caste-based reservation and other factors that make implementation of the current reservation policies difficult, our results suggest that parental education can potentially be a good criterion for affirmative action as it is easy to measure and does

not pose any problems for designation and re-designation (as is the case with caste categories). Such a criterion also makes sense given the changing role of caste in social stratification. Children with illiterate parents can potentially form the most backward category followed by those who have parents with secondary or lesser education and those with higher secondary education. Children whose parents have a graduate education may be outside the purview of affirmative action. Such a policy of reservation is self-limiting as once the parents become graduates, their children will not be eligible for reservation. If Aadhar becomes a reality and everybody has a unique identity with requisite information, implementing a programme on this basis will not suffer from information failures.

References

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Endnotes:

1. This Issue brief is a product of a series of research projects on higher education at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi. It summarises key insights from three papers written by the authors (Basant and Sen 2010; 2011; 2012).
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4. This is so as it captures those persons in the living population who had participated in higher education in the recent or distant past.
5. The participation rates (percentage) reported in Figures 2a, 2b, and the estimates of probability reported in Figures 3a, 3b, 4a and 4b based on results of the probit equations, can be referred back to Basant and Sen (2012).



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