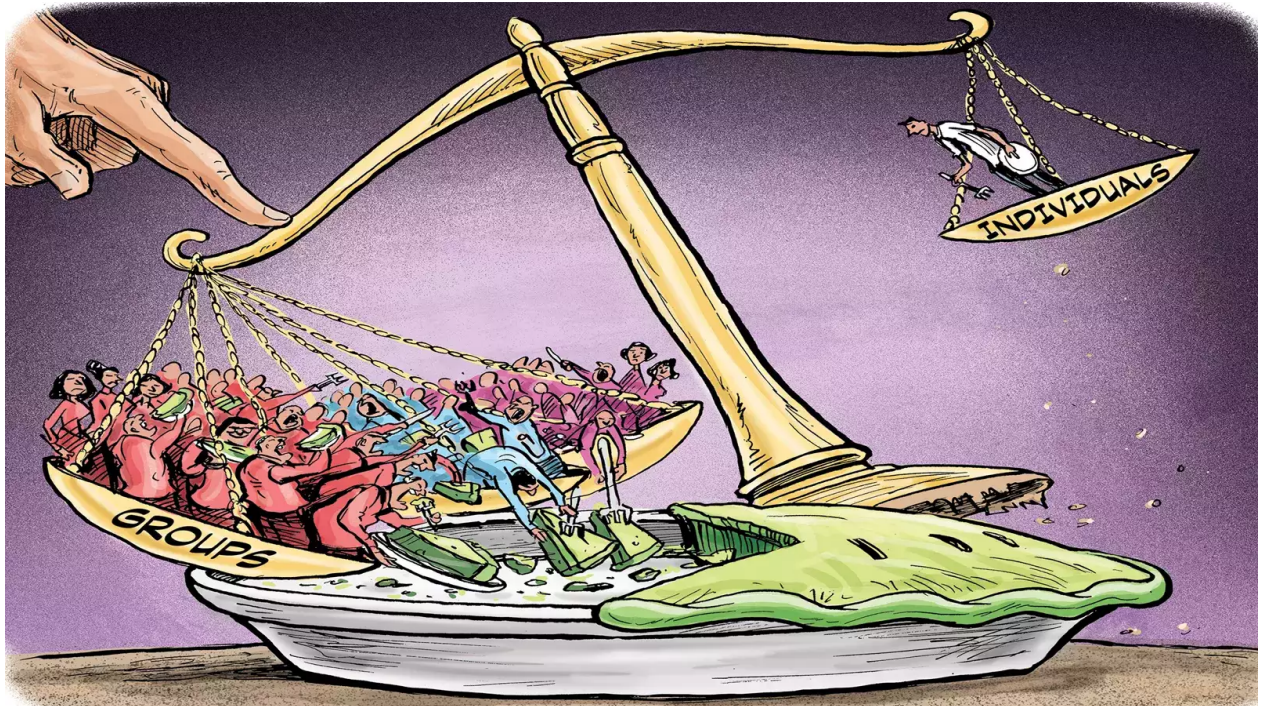


The 'I' in India should stand for individual not group identity



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Groups, not individuals, are the focus of most policy, politics. This has social, economic costs

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Everyone grows up with (or into) individual traits such as gender and intelligence, but also different group identities – you can be a Hindu or a Muslim, a Dalit or a Kayasth, a Bengali or a Malayali, and so on. How should the Indian state see the individual – as primarily defined by their individuality or by a group identity? The choice matters for it determines what we hold the state responsible for. It also affects how we see each other in society.

Our early leaders chose to focus on the individual. “I am glad,” Dr Ambedkar said, “that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.” However, the Constitution and subsequent policies also recognised the

importance of traditional groups such as those formed around religion, language, or caste.

For example, different civil codes governed different religious groups (though the Constitution's Directive Principles proposed to move eventually to a uniform civil code). Indian states were created along linguistic lines. Seats in academic institutions and government jobs are reserved for historically disadvantaged Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Reservations have also been extended to Other Backward Classes.

From Hindus and Muslims, Bengalis and Malayalis, men and women, who happen to be Indians also, we should become Indian citizens who happen to be men and women, Bengalis and Malayalis, and Hindus and Muslims

Because of the ease of organising politically around traditional group identities, the balance between individuals and traditional groups our leaders sought has shifted towards the latter. On the positive side, socially underprivileged groups have been able to bargain for their share of the collective pie, using the power of the group's vote. Consequently, inequality has fallen. But there are also downsides to emphasising group identity.

For instance, some members of a caste may be in a village, poorly served by a local government school, while others may be in a city, with plenty of good schooling alternatives. It is very hard for the caste to unite on the issue of remedying the quality of schooling. It

is much easier for it to unite on the issue of reservations in government jobs. Put differently, groups find it easier to demand a larger share of the existing pie, rather than push to alter individual circumstances that would enhance the pie and thus the individual's piece.

Consequently, the most disadvantaged members of the group get the least benefit from group privileges. While reservations have brought welcome social and economic mobility to men from underprivileged groups, women, whose overall participation in the labour force has fallen, have benefited far less. Analogously, while the most voluble in each religious group want traditional practices protected under the umbrella of group rights, women amongst their fold rarely get a hearing.

Moreover, when each group wants a larger share of the pie, we get a zero-sum game that becomes particularly conflictual in times of low growth. Even as Jats and Patidars demand reservations today, states are reserving jobs for the sons of the soil. Weaker groups get short shrift, and the notion of a level national playing field where each one has equal opportunity anywhere becomes harder to maintain.

Relatedly, when the state directs benefits to certain groups it solidifies group identity, even if the benefits do not trickle down to everyone. Of course, given that a group has been discriminated against historically, the state's attempts to redress the disadvantage give members a sense of recognition, of dignity, of equality that goes beyond the material benefits. But they also entrench societal cleavages.

In sum, group-targeted policies favour fights for group benefits over attempts to improve the individual circumstances that perpetuate disadvantage. They can exacerbate within-group and between-group inequality as the spoils are distributed according to power, and they strengthen differentiation over integration. Can't we do better?

An alternative is to distinguish between social disadvantage and economic disadvantage, and use different tools for each. When a caste faces continued social discrimination, caste identity is an easy way of identifying disadvantage, and thus an effective means for the government to offer economic supports such as reservations. Visible economic progress by some members of such castes enhances community confidence and their social status. Government benefits give members of these groups a sense of equal citizenship and should continue till social disadvantage is largely eliminated.

However, the problem for many others is economic disadvantage. Here, perhaps, the state should focus on a dual approach of enhancing individual capabilities everywhere through the better provision of public goods like healthcare and education, while targeting government benefits only to the truly economically underprivileged. A renewed thrust in the judiciary and the executive towards supporting the individuality and fundamental equality of persons is also needed, especially for the underprivileged within a traditional group.

Indeed, such support can help the emergence of new groups that unite across old traditional group identities. If the individual rights of a woman were protected as she fought discriminatory treatment in her job, fought for better maternal health provisions, for safer

public transport, for an end to discriminatory inheritance laws and to polygamy, it could create new powerful coalitions – for instance, of women across religious groups.

As more individuals recognise the rights they have through their citizenship, and mobilise to obtain those rights, their economic capabilities and opportunities will improve, as also will a strengthening of their identity as citizens.

Paradoxically, therefore, by shifting the emphasis back from traditional groups to the natural right of every individual to fair and equal treatment, we can forge newer group identities, united by our common emerging challenges. We could reach a consensus on a Uniform Civil Code, not because one group inflicts its majoritarian preferences on others, but because individuals within each religious group press for reforms that would give them the rights that all Indians should enjoy.

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This is the fourth article in an occasional series by the two authors