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No quota in pvt sector, please: India Inc

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NEW DELHI: India Inc does not quite see merit in corporate affairs minister Salman Khursheed's recent pitch for affirmative action. Khursheed wanted the corporate sector to provide jobs to minorities without any legislation that mandates it. But in these times of cut-throat competition, how can anything but merit be the guiding force, points out India Inc.

After all, business globally is conducted on the twin parameters of efficiency and merit, they ask. Yet, there is the question of corporate social responsibility. Can the two be reconciled? "Mindsets have changed in the last three to four years and many corporates do have their hearts in the right place," **says Ronesh Puri, MD of Executive Access which is a leading headhunting firm.**

"There is a genuine desire to give back to society, with more gender equality and more representation from rural backgrounds/N-E etc in recent years," he feels. However, he says the minister was wise not to push for quotas as that would lead to resistance.

Incidentally, a move in 2004 by the UPA government to have reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the private sector did not go down well with industry. The then minister for social justice and empowerment Meira Kumar argued that the responsibility of bringing about socio-economic transformation had to be shared by civil society, including captains of industry. But that move fell through.

Prof Samir K Barua, director of IIM, Ahmedabad, believes minority communities should be brought into the mainstream by making right to (good) education a fundamental right of every citizen. This would require educational institutions of the state to achieve the requisite quality, he says. "If this can be achieved and GDP growth rate goes above 8% per annum, the need for affirmative action will disappear over a period of time. The corporate sector should voluntarily assume responsibility in this regard, without sacrificing meritocracy."

HR heads of various companies reacted diplomatically. Some say affirmative action can be interpreted in various ways. Dr Santrupt Misra, director, HR, Aditya Birla Group, says that giving equal opportunity to all is affirmative action and not reservation. In his own group, he says, merit is the sole criterion while caste, religion, ethnicity are irrelevant. "We have people from all hues at all levels and we will continue with this policy."

For any large corporation, inclusion is the key word. It makes business sense too since having diverse employees makes it easier to understand and sell in a market from which they hail from. Misra says if a company is setting up a factory in interior Maharashtra, it would prefer someone who knows Marathi. "These are preferences which are inclusive in nature."

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