

for parents to send their children to school instead of going to earn money. These are resource intensive, but still, if the government wants to, there are so many things it can do. Who would ask for reservation if we were all given an equal education?

Do you think reservation should end?

I don't want to be called a reservationist. I don't want to beg anyone for a seat. Reservation should go, but before it goes, they should be implemented properly and after a certain time, you can eliminate them. But if reservation goes now, they will have to go back to the fields and to beg because that is all there is.

What do you think of the critiques that reservations are unfair because society should be based on merit?

Merit can only happen between equals. If a person doesn't have food and has to go to the field to feed its family, and goes to school only for the midday meal, you cannot compare that person with another person who has everything, who can go to school and to college. You have to give both of them equal opportunities, and then you can talk about merit.

Do you support reservation in the private sector in India?

Because, in India they don't give us any other opportunity, we are looking for reservation; it is the only way a few people can come up in life. After liberalization, government jobs are eroding. There is only reservation for government jobs, but there are no jobs, so what is the use of reservation? Especially the Manmohan Singh government is selling the public sector to the private sector, and there is no other way for us than to ask for reservation in the private sector.

A critique of US affirmative action is that it sometimes benefits those who don't need the help the most. Do you think the same is happening in India with reservation?

Yes. Reservation is being used by the top-level of people. That is not correct. Once you come up in life and you are a managing director or an IAS officer and your children are going for reservation, that is not good. It is limiting the people who really require reservation.

There are a few seats reserved for Dalits, and most Dalits are illiterate. If you take, for example, some of these fields like the financial sector or journalism, you don't see a single Dalit. So whoever is attempting to enter into these positions are the children of top-level Dalit executives. In India it is called the creamy layer. But if we eliminate the creamy layer, what happens is all of those seats go vacant and they are converted back to a general category. It's a very confusing thing. So what I say is, there should be a balance. The creamy layer should get the seat in certain situations, but if you are from the creamy layer, and there is someone below you, then they should be given preference.

Is there caste-based discrimination within the Indian-American community?

Caste is luggage we always carry. Some people feel proud that they are of the same caste. Some feel inferior, like Dalits here, we try to hide our caste. Once it's exposed, we can be discriminated against among other Indians. Don't misunderstand me—there are good people here, and all are not like that. As we have the second generation and third generation here, they will be more tolerant.

Do you think films like "Aarakshan," which touches on the issues we've been talking about, will help spark more dialogue?

Everybody goes to the movie theater. If social things are projected in a proper perspective, there will definitely be a lot of change. But again, filmmakers, who are they? They are from the upper-caste communities, therefore they show whatever they want, according to their ideologies. In some movies, Dalits are ridiculed. "Lagaan," which competed for an Oscar, did not impress me. It was a stereotype of Dalits. There may be a different person, a progressive person who will take it in a different way but so far, I have never seen Dalits projected in a positive way. But if you have good intentions, and want real change, movies are one of the best mediums to get to the masses.

Correction: A previous version of this article misstated the state in which Kaila attended university. It is Andhra Pradesh, not Uttar Pradesh. Firstpost regrets the error.