

branch in Dubai. Others are looking at similar opportunities. Ironically, the best institutions may continue to be Indian but could just be outside India.

The messiah of Mandal II, HRD Minister Arjun Singh, has clearly won the first round. While he has insured his political survival within the

Congress and the Government, he has also, in a small way, ensured victory for himself or his family in the next polls in the OBC-dominated Satna-Sidhi region of Madhya Pradesh. The Congress too has used the protests to gain traction among the OBC, though the jury is out on whether it will translate into electoral

gains. Manmohan may appear to have lost some of the sheen of credibility but the biggest casualty is the democratic process. That such a major decision should be ushered in through the back door and used brazenly for political gains is a telling statement on governance under the UPA.

HEMANT CHAWLA



INTERVIEW | **SAM PITRODA**

“Should children carry caste labels in this age?”

Sam Pitroda, chairman of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), spoke to Managing Editor SHANKAR AIYAR on reservations in higher education. Excerpts:

Q. Two members of the NKC have quit protesting against the quotas.

A. It is a great loss but I respect their decision.

Q. Are you planning to quit? What happens to the NKC now?

A. No. We are advising the Government on knowledge from the five key standpoints: access to knowledge;

knowledge concepts; knowledge creation; knowledge application and knowledge services. Reservations are just one part of a much larger puzzle related to access.

Q. What is the NKC's stand on reservations?

“My job is to see what is good for India, not what is good for a caste or for votes.”

A. The information society we want to build must be inclusive. Reservations in schools are all right; in fact, there should be 100 per cent compulsory education for everyone.

Q. What about professional colleges, higher education ...?

A. We have allowed too much political interference. They need more autonomy, not quotas.

Q. How do you make higher education inclusive without quotas?

A. Expand. Provide more seats and start more IITs and IIMs. Build more universities.

Q. Have you spoken to the prime minister?

A. Yes. I have spoken to the prime minister and explained our position.

Q. What was his reaction?

A. He listened to us. He knows the issues involved.

Q. Is your spat with Arjun Singh a difference of opinion or politics?

A. I am not qualified to comment on the politics of it. My job is to see what is good for India, not what is good for a particular caste or for votes.

Q. Why did the NKC have to enter the reservations arena?

A. It is our moral duty to speak up. My problem is that people get confused between access and excellence.

Q. Does Sam Pitroda represent an upper caste view?

A. I am the son of a carpenter. I am an OBC. But I never took advantage of quotas. This is not about personal stuff.

Q. So what is this all about?

A. This is not about reservations. This is about 550 million children who are the future of India. Do we want them to be identified by their castes in the 21st century? This is about the new India of the next century and how we want to shape it.

For full text of the interview log on to

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“Merit is used to practise mental untouchability”

SUMEET INDER SINGH



The soft-spoken Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Meira Kumar spoke to Managing Editor SHANKAR AIYAR and Special Correspondent NEERAJ MISHRA on reservations in the private sector. Excerpts:

Q. There is a race among Congressmen on reservations. Is the party desperate?

A. There is no race nor is the Congress desperate.

Q. Is it not true that the Congress is using quotas as a formula to regain its lost glory by wooing voters?

A. There is certainly glory whenever the SC/ST population is taken along on the path of development. Not just for

“There is support for affirmative action but the private sector is holding back on reservations.”

political parties, but also for the nation.

Q. How come B.R. Ambedkar did not think of reservations for the SC/ST in the private sector?

A. There is no such statement by Dr Ambedkar suggesting that this is unconstitutional.

Q. But he didn't suggest reservations for the SC/ST in the private sector.

A. I won't go into who suggested it.

The fact is that after the 1991 liberalisation, it was felt that jobs were being created in the private sector. Dalits need to get a share of prosperity.

Q. What is the stance of the Group of Ministers?

A. We have met each of the representative private sector industrial organisations such as Assocham, PHDCCI, CII and FICCI. There is support for affirmative action, though the private sector seems to be holding back on reservations.

Q. What is the view of the industry chambers and corporates?

A. I have been talking to captains of industry such as Ratan Tata, Sunil Mittal, Keshub Mahindra and Anu Aga. They have been very positive. Twenty-one of them have also sent letters of support for affirmative action. They have talked about skill-building, scholarships and capacity-building.

Q. Is the Government focusing on jobs and not skills because that's what gets the politicians the votes?

A. Getting votes is being spoken about with much contempt. We live in a country which is a democracy.

Q. Six out of 10 Dalits are unable to make it through primary school. Shouldn't that be the focus?

A. I have been hearing this sermon from private industry for some time. They need to visit remote areas where the Government is spending millions to educate the underprivileged. They are casting aspersions on our merit, which I feel is some kind of mental untouchability.

Q. Has industry asked for a formula for implementing quotas?

A. With the kind of mandate we have, we can push legislation any day. But we want harmony and want industry to do it voluntarily. Now I have got requests from industrialists asking whether we have a formula.

Q. Can we expect a Bill in the Monsoon session?

A. I won't give a deadline but it is going to happen very soon.



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